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## Early Independent Catholicism in Context:

A re-examination of the career of Archbishop Joseph René Vilatte

(1884-1929)

Alexis Tančibok

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Archbishop Joseph René Vilatte, a principal founder of Independent Catholicism, has for over 70 years been caricatured as a charlatan and religious adventurer. This thesis argues that, with the discovery of new material, a reevaluation of Vilatte's career is warranted, and shows that contrary to the traditional narratives, Vilatte was above all a missionary, and campaigner for his vision of Catholic orthodoxy; mainly in America, but also in France. In line with other Old Catholics Vilatte believed that Rome was an impediment to Catholic unity, and that Rome's centralised ecclesial model impeded Christian liberty, and hampered missions. Under the influence of Hyacinthe Loyson, Vilatte initially believed that Anglo-Catholics could be partners with the Old Catholics in the new mission field of America. After 1889, however, Dutch Old Catholics convinced Vilatte to sever his relations with the Episcopalians in Wisconsin. This not only forced Vilatte to clarify the differences between his Old Catholicism, Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism, but it resulted in the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch authorising his consecration as a missionary metropolitan in Colombo, Ceylon, in 1892, changing his mission to a national Independent Catholic

movement in the United States. The thesis explores some of the challenges Vilatte faced as a missionary, unsupported by traditional institutions. The thesis further examines Vilatte's view of Christian reunion, which he believed could only happen through Catholic unity, led by the universal episcopate rather than one church or individual. The most puzzling aspect of Vilatte's career was his relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. On three occasions he negotiated reconciliation, but the available evidence shows that on all three occasions he did not abandon his belief in Catholic reform, nor did he intend to not function as a missionary.

**Early Independent Catholicism in Context:**  
**A re-examination of the career of Archbishop Joseph René Vilatte**  
**(1884-1929)**

Alexis Tančibok

For PhD

Department of Theology

Durham University

2020

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## Appendix: Chronology of Joseph René Vilatte's Life

24 January 1854 - Vilatte born in Paris, France.

19 July 1870 - 10 May 1871 — Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune; Vilatte enlists in Garde National defending Paris in the latter part of the war.

1874 - 1876 — Vilatte immigrates to Canada and works for two years as a teacher near Ottawa.

1876 — Vilatte enters noviciate of Order of Christian Brothers, Namur, Belgium.

1878 — Vilatte returns to Canada and enters St. Laurent seminary in Montreal where he studies for the next two years.

June 1880 — Vilatte attends lectures given by Charles Chiniquy, and decides to leave the seminary.

1881 - 1883 — Vilatte studies Protestant theology at McGill in Montreal, works as a

missionary on the Northeast Coast of the United States between terms.

1883 — Enters noviciate of Clerics of St. Viator in Bourbonnais, IL, but soon after visits Chiniquy who persuades Vilatte to stay with him and not return to the monastery.

March 1884 — Chiniquy arranges a preaching and missionary post for Vilatte with the Presbyterian French mission in Green Bay, WI. Later this year Vilatte writes to Hyacinthe Loyson in Paris.

8 April 1884 — Presbyterians licence Vilatte to preach in Green Bay.

15 July 1884 — Presbyterians ordain Vilatte.

15 December 1884 — Vilatte's first letter to Bishop J. H. Brown of the Episcopal diocese of Fond du Lac.

28 February 1885 — Vilatte resigns his post at Calvary Presbyterian Church, Green Bay.

27 April 1885 — Brown recommends that Vilatte follow Loyson's advice, and seek ordination from the Old Catholics in Switzerland.

5 May 1885 — Brown writes to Eduard Herzog, Old Catholic bishop of Berne, asking him to ordain Vilatte.

16 May 1885 - 3 June 1885 — Vilatte travels from New York to Berne, Switzerland.

6 - 7 June 1885 — Herzog ordains Vilatte deacon and priest in Berne.

13 - 28 June 1885 — Vilatte travels from Berne to Green Bay.

January - March 1886 — Vilatte raises \$4,500 for the Precious Blood mission in  
Gardner, WI.

20 September 1886 — Brown consecrates Church of the Precious Blood in Gardner.

1 - 30 November 1886 — Vilatte on fundraising tour of the East Coast.

2 May 1888 — Brown dies.

13 November 1888 — Charles Grafton elected to succeed Brown as bishop of Fond  
du Lac.

July 1889 - September 1890 — Dutch Old Catholics including Archbishop Jan  
Heykamp write to Vilatte urging him to protect his Catholic identity and  
sever his ties with the Episcopalians.

16 November 1889 — Vilatte elected bishop by his Old Catholic missions in  
Wisconsin.

15 April 1890 — Grafton writes to Vilatte stating that he can release him to Herzog,  
but that Vilatte owes him (Grafton) obedience.

18 April 1890 — Herzog writes to Grafton confirming that neither he, nor the

German bishops will consecrate Vilatte.

6 September 1890 — Loyson writes to Herzog supporting Vilatte's consecration.

12-15 September 1890 — Old Catholic Congress, Cologne.

23 October 1890 — Vilatte writes to Archbishop Jan Heykamp of Utrecht to inform him that the American Old Catholics would continue with the help of the Russian Orthodox Bishop Vladimir in San Francisco.

20 January 1891 — Vilatte writes to Mar Alvares in Colombo, Ceylon.

9 May 1891 — Vladimir gives Vilatte and the Old Catholic mission his episcopal protection.

15 July 1891 - 22 August 1891 — Vilatte travels from the United States to Ceylon.

29 December 1891 — The Patriarch of Antioch approves Vilatte's consecration.

29 May 1892 — Vilatte consecrated as metropolitan of America by Mar Alvares, Mar Athanasius, and Mar Gregorius, in Colombo, Ceylon.

8 June - 5 August 1892 — Vilatte travels from Colombo to Dyckesville, WI.

23 October 1892 — Protestant Episcopal Church General Convention in Baltimore condemns Vilatte and his consecration.

April - August 1894 — Vilatte, at the request of his congregation, attempts to

negotiate a reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church.

24 August 1894 — Vilatte ordains Stefan Kaminski, Cleveland, OH.

20 March 1898 — Vilatte consecrates Kaminski, Buffalo, NY.

July 1898 — Vilatte arrives in London from New York on or before the 13th. He ordains Fr. Ignatius at Llanthony Abbey, Wales, on 27 July.

November 1898 - January 1899 — Vilatte stays with Dom Jean Parisot at Abbey of Liguge in Poitou, France. From there he travels to Rome where, on 20 January, he is reportedly negotiating reconciliation.

2 February 1899 — Vilatte, in Rome, signs abjuration of his errors, submits to the pope.

25 December 1899 — Rome refuses Vilatte's submission.

6 May 1900 — Vilatte consecrates Paolo Miraglia Gulotti in Piacenza, Italy.

3 February 1907 — Inaugural liturgy of French Apostolic Church in Paris causes near riot, police required to eject protesters.

7 March 1909 — Vilatte ordains Asaph Harris and Robert Clare Taylor in Winnipeg, Canada. Harris succeeds Fr. Ignatius (d. 23 Oct. 08) as Abbot of Llanthony Abbey, Wales.

28 December 1915 — Vilatte consecrates F. E. J. Lloyd in Chicago, IL.

August 1919 — Vilatte travels to Norway to ordain Caud Knudsen in Kragero.

April 1920 — Chicago synod; Vilatte retires as primate in favour of Lloyd.

28 September 1921 — Vilatte consecrates George McGuire in Chicago.

July 1923 — Vilatte returns to Paris.

24 October 1924 — Fr. Eugène Prévost obtains papal approval to approach Vilatte to gain his submission to Rome.

19 January 1925 — Prévost approaches Vilatte about reconciling with Rome.

1 June 1925 — Vilatte recants his errors in the presence of the Papal Nuncio to Paris, Archbishop Ceretti. He retires to live independently on the grounds of the Cistercian monastery at Pont-Colbert, near Versailles.

29 December 1928 — Vilatte writes to Jean Bricaud telling him he is planning to sever his links with Rome.

1 July 1929 — Vilatte dies at Pont Colbert.





Vilatte 1899

# 1: Introduction

This thesis offers a fresh examination of the career of Joseph René Vilatte and his role in the early development of the Independent Catholic movement. Few people are aware of Independent Catholicism and this is no surprise. The modern movement consists mostly of numerous, small, diverse and scattered communities. It does not have a large institutional presence, such as the Roman Catholic or Anglican churches. Julie Byrne nevertheless describes Independent Catholics as being numerous enough throughout their history ‘that one may consider independents a characteristic feature of modern Catholicism.’<sup>1</sup> Byrne’s *The Other Catholics: Remaking America’s Largest Religion* is an exploration not of Joseph René Vilatte, but of his legacy, the modern Independent Catholic movement, which originated from Vilatte’s Catholic reform project. Byrne describes Independent Catholics as ‘Catholicism’s research lab’.<sup>2</sup> Through her decade-long contact with one of the more established

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Byrne, *The Other Catholics: Remaking America’s Largest Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), loc. 1384. Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, loc. 215. Her description is not unique. See for example: John Plummer, *The Many Paths of the Independent Sacramental Movement: A National Study of Its Liturgy, Doctrine, and Leadership* (Berkeley: Apocryphile Press, 2006).

Independent Catholic communities, *The Church of Antioch*, Byrne explores Vilatte's lasting legacy of diverse Catholicisms. She argues that the Independent Catholics are of interest because, through their expressions of Catholicism, we can better understand the trends and fissures on the landscape of modern American Roman Catholicism.<sup>3</sup> Byrne estimates that there are between a half a million and a million Independent Catholics in the United States today.<sup>4</sup> There are no known figures for how many there are in Europe. Of the historical figures within the movement, Vilatte looms large.<sup>5</sup> The importance of Byrne's work is two fold. Firstly she shows that there is academic interest not only in modern Independent Catholicism, but also that there is a need for more academic research to be done on its historical roots.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Byrne links Vilatte to his legacy, describing how he is an important figure to a Catholic tradition that has, against all expectations, lasted and continues to evolve.

Independent Catholicism is not new, but rather the product of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Catholic reform movements. After Vatican I, various streams of Independent Catholicism in Europe coalesced to form the Union of Utrecht, or the Old Catholics, in 1889. Joseph René Vilatte (1854-1929), and the stream of Independent Catholicism he continued after his consecration in 1892, was

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<sup>3</sup> Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, loc. 217.

<sup>4</sup> Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, loc. 1091-1111.

<sup>5</sup> Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, loc. 1750.

<sup>6</sup> Byrne, *The Other Catholics*, loc. 1380-1384. For another examination of the modern movement from an insider's viewpoint see: Plummer, *Many Paths*.

caught up in the tumult of this process. Vilatte is regarded in the Independent Catholic community as a key founder of the movement, and although he was not a seminal figure of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Catholicism as a whole, Vilatte did participate in the debates of that time about Catholic identity, and about other issues such as Christian reunion and the church's response to social and political change. His archiepiscopal career spanned nearly four decades between 1892 and 1929. During this time he campaigned for his vision of Catholic reform, mainly in the United States and France. He also supported or organised projects in Canada, Mexico, Norway, and Italy. No other early Independent Catholic had such a wide-ranging impact. Arnold Harris Mathew, the other recognised early leader, had an episcopal career of only 11 years (1908-1919) and was based exclusively in Britain. Most currently available sources about Vilatte's life and work are polemical rather than academic studies. The absence of scholarship about Vilatte's life and work has obscured his legacy to the Independent Catholic movement for decades, and has resulted in speculation about, and misrepresentation of, his ideas and activity. A lack of primary source material, and the inaccessibility of known sources has, until recently, ruled out substantive academic exploration of Vilatte's career and role in early Independent Catholicism. This project uses newly discovered material to ask how he became a founding father of the movement, what were the key themes of his ideas about Catholic reform, and how did he work to realise these ideas?

A brief sketch introducing Vilatte will be helpful. Vilatte was born in Paris on 24 January 1854. After the Paris Commune, he immigrated to Canada, where he discovered his vocation for ordained ministry. He suffered a crisis of conscience which, at least in the currently available source material, he did not fully detail, but which clearly involved the clash of ultramontanism and the freedom and liberty he experienced while in Canada. Vilatte spent four years working as a missionary for an interdenominational Protestant project, before finally finding his religious identity as an Old Catholic in 1884. Vilatte, with the help of the former Roman Catholic priest Hyacinthe Loyson, and the encouragement and support of the Protestant Episcopal bishop John Henry Hobart Brown (1831-1888), established the first Old Catholic mission in the United States after his ordination in Berne in 1885. The Dutch Old Catholics took an interest in his work in 1889-90 and urged Vilatte to sever his ties with the Episcopalians. This rupture between Vilatte and the Episcopalians ultimately resulted in his consecration in Ceylon in 1892. Though he distanced himself from the European Old Catholics from 1905, Vilatte, excepting his puzzling reconciliation attempts with Rome (discussed in Chapter 8), championed a vision of Catholic reform inspired by Loyson and Eugène Michaud until his death in Versailles in 1929.

### **Independentism: Causes & Responses**

The increased centralisation of authority within the Roman Catholic Church

throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - expressed through the ideas of ultramontanism, and the decisions of Vatican I - gave rise to a number of protests. In the Netherlands, the Archdiocese of Utrecht defended its historic rights of autonomy against this centralisation. In Ceylon, the Padroado Defence Association protested over the fact that local considerations were not heard, and arbitrary decisions made from Rome. In the United States, a handful of Roman Catholic congregations throughout the nineteenth century protested over similar arbitrary exercise of clerical power, and the lack of democratic spirit. These events - and others elsewhere - formed the backdrop to the emergence of Independent Catholicism, an overlooked movement that has its roots in, but branched out from, early Old Catholicism during the lifetime of Joseph René Vilatte. Initially, none of these independent streams demanded independence from the Bishop of Rome. Most Independent Catholics, Johann Ignaz von Döllinger, Vilatte, Eugène Michaud, and the early Polish independents included, held fast to the importance of Rome as the Patriarchal seat of western Catholicism. Rather they sought independence from an expression of Roman Catholicism, namely ultramontanism, that they believed deformed orthodoxy and impeded the mission of the church in the modern age.

In the Netherlands, what began as a struggle over the succession of a Roman Catholic archdiocese in Holland ended with a schism, and an independent Catholic church. The archdiocese of Utrecht was faced with two issues: its supposed

Jansenism, and its defence of the see's historic rights to elect its own bishop.<sup>7</sup> With the death of the deposed Archbishop Peter Codde in 1710, the chapter carried on without a primate.<sup>8</sup> Between Codde's death, and the consecration of Cornelius van Steenoven in 1724, the church of Utrecht vigorously defended its national church rights. Canonists and clerics from across Europe supported them. Dominique Marie Varlet, who also found himself on the wrong side of eighteenth century ecclesiastical politics, consecrated Steenoven in Amsterdam on 15 October 1724.<sup>9</sup> It is easy to forget that from 1724 Utrecht, which remained independent of the Roman Church, became a national 'independent Catholic' body. As the Old Catholic movement in Europe emerged in the mid- to late nineteenth century Utrecht became the source of much needed apostolic succession to nascent Old Catholic Churches elsewhere in Europe, as such it is seen as the mother church of Old Catholicism. Only after 1889, when the German, Swiss and Dutch 'Old Catholics' united, forming the Union of Utrecht, was there a shift in its status and identity. Both Utrecht and the Swiss Old Catholics played important roles in Vilatte's career.

Roman Catholic independentism in the United States provides a further

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<sup>7</sup> James Mitchell, 'The Ordination in Ireland of Jansenist Clergy from Utrecht, 1715-16: The Role of Fr. Paul Kenny, ODC, of Co. Galway (Part One)', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, 42 (1989/1990), 2-29 (p. 2).

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, 'Ordination in Ireland of Jansenist Clergy', p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Neale, *A History of The So-Called Jansenist Church of Holland: With A Sketch Of Its Earlier Annals, And Some Account of The Brothers of The Common Life* (Oxford, 1858), p. 256.

backdrop to Vilatte's career. Individual clergy, or congregations, enthused with the democratic spirit of the New World, found themselves in conflict with the spread of the American hierarchy, and the imposition of its authority. Some saw little problem in severing their ties to the local bishop, often using control of parish property as the means of protest (often referred to as trusteeism). In most instances, the parish defended its loyalty to the Pope. On rare occasions a parish entertained the idea of full independence. Catholics in South Carolina proposed in 1819 sending the Irish priest Father Hayes to Utrecht for consecration, to then return to the United States and found an Independent Catholic diocese.<sup>10</sup>

The distinction between these two currents of independentism and trusteeism is not always easy to make. Trusteeism centred on the conflict between the laity and the authority of American Roman Catholic bishops over parish buildings and the temporal goods and assets of the local church. Independentism is reflected in the liberal attitudes of nineteenth century immigrant Roman Catholics, such as Oliver Fernandez, who sought greater lay involvement in the church. One often encompassed the other, as when trustees refused to deed their parish property to the local bishop. Independentism arose because of the strain between congregations and the consolidating American hierarchy. Separated from their traditional national Catholicisms, and faced with moves towards uniformity by hierarchs, often not of

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Guilday, *The Life and Times of John England, First Bishop of Charleston (1786-1842)*, 2 vols (New York: America Press, 1927), I pp. 272-274.



their own ethnicity, congregations protested and rebelled. After 1892 they sometimes turned to Vilatte for Catholic episcopal oversight more sympathetic to their identities and concerns.

Turning to the last of the three regions identified above, Mar Alvares (1836-1923), who consecrated Vilatte in Colombo, Ceylon, appears to have been the first to apply the label Independent Catholic to his community in Ceylon and southern India.<sup>11</sup> Alvares was consecrated on 29 July 1889. He had previously been a leading activist of the Padroado Defence Association, and led its congregations into the Syrian Orthodox church in the summer of 1888. Alvares campaigned for local self-sufficiency as a social political ideal, as much as he defended local Catholic identity. This was an idea which resonated with ethnic European Roman Catholics in the United States. For Alvares, as for Vilatte, 'independent' did not mean disconnected from other Catholic communities. Alvares died on 23 September 1923 and is now commemorated as a saint by the Syrian Orthodox in India.

Independentism in this period was not limited to the Netherlands, other parts of continental Europe, the United States and Ceylon. Active around the time of Vilatte's consecration, The Guild of St. Columb, in London, identified as Independent or Old

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<sup>11</sup> Antonio Francisco Xavier Alvares was given the consecration name Mar Julius, but is usually referred to as Mar Alvares in English. *The Independent Catholic*, the community's official paper, began publishing in Colombo, Ceylon in January, 1892.

Catholic.<sup>12</sup> Vilatte later took up the leadership of the Guild, and it is possible he met with its members when he stayed in London in 1898.<sup>13</sup> Jules Ferrette (1828-1904), consecrated in 1866 by the future Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV,<sup>14</sup> attempted to establish an Independent Catholic presence in England. Ferrette campaigned on the idea of Christian reunion through apostolic succession, and was widely ridiculed in the British papers at the time. Fr. Joseph O'Halloran organised a later British experiment in independentism, though largely grounded in ecclesiology rather than theology, as was Ferrette's. O'Halloran believed that regular bishops were prejudiced against non-monastic clergy.<sup>15</sup> He campaigned for non-monastic bishops to oversee secular clergy in London.<sup>16</sup> He established an Independent Catholic community in Gunnersbury in 1903, and lobbied the Old Catholics to consecrate Arnold Harris Mathew.<sup>17</sup> O'Halloran's association with Mathew was short-lived. When Mathew learned that O'Halloran would not reject the supremacy of the Pope, he dismissed him. Vilatte faced the same difference over loyalty to the Pope with independent Polish Catholics in the United States in 1895.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 'Independent Catholics of London', *The Independent Catholic*, January 1892, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Orthodox Catholic Guild of Saint Columba of Iona', *The American Old Catholic*, May 1915, p. 8. *The American Old Catholic* was the title of Vilatte's official organ.

<sup>14</sup> Contemporary sources number Patriarch Ignatius Boutros III.

<sup>15</sup> 'The Rebellious Priest', *Liverpool Echo*, 21 July 1897, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Rebellious Priest', *Liverpool Echo*, 22 July 1897, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> 'Reuter's Telegrams: The Catholic Revolt From Rome', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 26 January 1903, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> 'Refuses Them Recognition', *Rock Island Argus*, 7 September 1895, p. 1.

### Vilatte's Catholic Mission In Context: Opponents & Geographical Scope

Vilatte's vision of Catholic reform was at odds with both Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic goals in the United States, where there was a contemporary struggle between the two to define and claim an American Catholic identity. Some Roman Catholic bishops sought to purge ethnically diverse parishes of what they considered non-Americanism, and to impose strict conformity to the liturgical and organisational practices determined in Rome. For some Anglo-Catholics, such as Bishops Brown, Arthur Cleveland Coxe, and Charles Grafton, Catholic reform meant promoting the idea of the Anglican tradition as truly Catholic, and indeed truly Old Catholic, to compete with the Roman Catholics on the North American mission field. Vilatte's consecration as Metropolitan of America in 1892 was, as we shall see, a challenge to the Roman Catholics in Wisconsin, and a threat to Bishop Grafton's plans. Grafton never forgave Vilatte, whom he had intended to co-opt to further his own ends.<sup>19</sup>

Vilatte's project began in 1885 as a local Old Catholic missionary among

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<sup>19</sup> Fr. Harding published a pamphlet in 1920 in which he states: 'I attended Bp. Grafton during his last illness, I and one other person heard him express sorrow and regret for his vindictiveness towards Father Vilatte': Augustine de Angelis, *A Friendly Correction Of The Reverend A. Parker Curtiss' Statements About Father Vilatte In The Holy Cross Magazine for August, 1920* (Chicago: 1920). This is the only known account of this interaction.

Francophone immigrants in Wisconsin. After his consecration, no doubt inspired by the example of Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV and the attitude of Mar Alvares his prime consecrator, Vilatte broadened his understanding of his own mission field, and took up opportunities to spread the message of Catholic reform nationally and internationally. His decision to do so was controversial. In the United States Anglo-Catholics aligned with Bishop Grafton viewed Vilatte, now a metropolitan, as an invader of their territory, as did British Anglicans when Vilatte ordained Fr. Ignatius in 1898. After the French passed the 1905 law separating Church and State, Vilatte assisted Henri des Houx and others to organise a national Independent Catholic movement in France. Opposition was fierce, a riot was barely avoided at the inaugural liturgy, and Vilatte was assaulted on at least one occasion in the streets of Paris. Criticism focussed on the claim that true Frenchmen were Roman Catholic, and on depicting Vilatte, a naturalised American citizen, as a foreigner interfering in French religious matters (including parodies of him as <sup>20</sup>'an American monkey')<sup>21, 22</sup>. Vilatte's consecration in 1892 expanded his vision of what might be accomplished for Catholic reform. Though he was personally concerned with French and Belgian immigrant Catholics in the United States, he believed that it was his duty, as a missionary, and a metropolitan, to cultivate and encourage the spread of Independent Catholicism among other ethnic and national groups in the United

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<sup>20</sup> 'Din In Paris Church', *New York Tribune*, 4 February 1907, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> 'Din In Paris Church', *New York Tribune*, 4 February 1907, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> 'Din In Paris Church', *New York Tribune*, 4 February 1907, p. 1.

States, Canada, Italy, Britain, France, Norway, Mexico, and possibly Columbia.

### **Terminology: 'Old Catholic', 'Independent Catholic, and 'Orthodox'**

Old Catholic, Independent Catholic and Orthodox, are the labels used during Vilatte's career to describe what is now called 'Independent Catholic'. At the time, however, key figures such as Mar Alvares in Ceylon, Hyacinthe Loyson in Paris, the Russian Orthodox Bishop Vladimir resident at San Francisco, the Episcopal Bishop Arthur Cleveland Coxe, and even Bishop Grafton used one or more of these labels interchangeably. Coxe referred to himself as Old Catholic, much to the consternation of the Dutch Old Catholics. Mar Alvares is perhaps the first to use the label Independent Catholic, even though he was firmly rooted in the Syrian Orthodox hierarchy in India. He liberally interchanged Old Catholic and Orthodox in his publications and letters. The Russian bishop Vladimir also interchanged Orthodox and Old Catholic in his dealings with Vilatte. Though Vilatte, like the others, used these labels interchangeably, he appears to have preferred Old Catholic until about 1905 when he switched to Independent Catholic or Orthodox. Bishop Herzog, the Old Catholic bishop of Berne, as early as 1898 made concerted and public efforts to exclude Vilatte from identifying himself and his churches as Old Catholic, declaring in a letter published in *The Church Eclectic* in February 1899 that Bishop Antoni

Kozlowski was ‘*the only Old Catholic bishop in America*.’<sup>23</sup> Though Vilatte was doctrinally aligned with the European Old Catholics, and maintained ties within European Old Catholic circles, neither he, nor his American mission were formally a member of the Union of Utrecht. Vilatte and the Dutch Old Catholic effort to formalise his ties between 1888 and 1890 failed. The term Independent Catholic not only refers to independence from the Roman Catholic Church, it also reflects the reality that Vilatte’s formal ties were with the Church in Ceylon and India, and not with the European Old Catholics. It also captures some of Vilatte’s core ideas about ecclesiology and doctrine, as will become apparent over the course of this thesis. In order to be consistent, and to reduce the possibility for confusion, Independent Catholic is used throughout the text of this project, except where other terms are clearer or appear in quoted sources.

## Survey of Existing Material

A review of published sources about Vilatte may appear easy, since so little has been written. However, the few sources that do exist pose an academic challenge in part because of their authors’ purposes. Four sources have the most influence, and of these two are well-known: Henry Brandreth’s *Episcopi Vagantes and the Anglican*

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<sup>23</sup> ‘René Vilatte’, *The Church Eclectic*, February 1899, 1015-1016 (p. 1016), italics original.

*Church*<sup>24</sup> and Peter Anson's *Bishops At Large*.<sup>25</sup> By default, these have become the definitive sources about early Independent Catholics such as Vilatte and Arnold Harris Mathew. Two others, Abba Seraphim's *Flesh of Our Brethren*,<sup>26</sup> and Serge Thériault's *Msgr. René Vilatte Community Organizer of Religion, 1854-1929*,<sup>27</sup> are more recent, and do not have Brandreth and Anson's recognition or status outside of Independent Catholic circles. Other sources, such as Parisot's biographical sketch,<sup>28</sup> and journal articles by Marx<sup>29</sup> and Hogue,<sup>30</sup> fill out the collection of frequently cited sources,<sup>31</sup> although these are more difficult to access.

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<sup>24</sup> Henry Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes and the Anglican Church* (London: S.P.C.K., 1961).

<sup>25</sup> Peter, Anson, *Bishops At Large* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964).

<sup>26</sup> Abba Seraphim, *Flesh of Our Brethren* (London: British Orthodox Press, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Serge Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte: Community Organiser of Religion, 1854-1929* (Berkeley: Apocryphile Press, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Jean Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte: Fondateur de l'Église Vieille-Catholique Aux États-Unis D'Amérique* (Tours, 1899).

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Marx, 'The Old Catholics In America', *The Salesianum*, 36 (October 1941), 155-161; Joseph Marx and Benjamin Blied, 'Joseph René Vilatte', *The Salesianum*, 37 (January 1942), 1-8; Joseph Marx and Benjamin Blied, 'Archbishop Vilatte', *The Salesianum*, 37 (April 1942), 59-67; Joseph Marx and Benjamin Blied, 'Vilatte and the Catholic Church', *The Salesianum*, 37 (July 1942), 113-120.

<sup>30</sup> William M. Hogue, 'The Episcopal Church And Archbishop Vilatte', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 34 (March 1965), 35-55.

<sup>31</sup> The following selection of sources demonstrates that discussions about early Independent Catholicism, and especially Vilatte rely heavily on Brandreth and Anson: Richard G. Salomon, 'An English "Episcopus Vagans" and His Relations to America', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 24 (June 1955), 198-200 (p. 198); Daniel S. Buczek, 'Polish-Americans And The Roman Catholic Church', *The Polish Review*, 21 (1976), 39-61 (p. 50); Laurence J. Orzell, 'Curious Allies: Bishop Antoni Kozłowski and the Episcopalians', *Polish American Studies*, 40 (Autumn 1983), 36-58 (p. 40); Adrian Hermann, 'The Early Periodicals of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (1903-1904) and the Emergence of a Transregional and Transcontinental Indigenous-Christian Public Sphere', *Philippine Studies: Historical*

Jean Parisot published the earliest biography of Vilatte in 1899. Although Parisot is a sympathetic biographer, he used Vilatte's story as a cautionary tale for Catholic dissidents. Parisot urged upon those who were separated from the Roman Catholic Church the necessity of 'returning to the one fold, where they will find the end of their uncertainties and sufferings.'<sup>32</sup> Likewise he encouraged the Roman Catholic faithful to reach out to schismatics, and to facilitate their return to the church. 'Catholics will appreciate the benefit of unity, and seek the souls of their separated brethren with greater passion.'<sup>33</sup> Parisot's interviews with Vilatte, and access to his collection of letters and documents, would become the core of material about Vilatte used by later authors.<sup>34</sup> Parisot organised the material to emphasise the strife between Vilatte and Bishop Charles Grafton of the Episcopal diocese of Fond Du Lac. All succeeding biographical sketches of Vilatte reproduced the structure, and content of Parisot's narrative detailing Vilatte's career between 1884 and 1899.

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*and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 62 (September-December 2014), 549-565 (p. 557-558); Bernard Leeming, 'Are They Really Bishops', *The Heythrop Journal*, 5 (July 1964), 259-267. Butler cites Thériault, and not Anson, though Anson briefly mentions Vilatte's colony in Mexico: Matthew Butler, 'Rojinegras: Catholic Anticlericalism and Mexico's Revolutionary Schism', *The Americas*, 65 (April 2009), 535-558 (p. 537); Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 123-124.

<sup>32</sup> 'A ceux-ci nous souhaitons de conclure à la nécessité du retour au bercail unique, où ils trouveront le terme de leurs incertitudes et de leurs souffrances': Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> '...les catholiques apprécieront le bienfait de l'unité et chercheront plus ardemment les âmes de leurs frères séparés': Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 7



Henry Brandreth's *Episcopi Vagantes and the Anglican Church* is not a history of Independent Catholicism, nor a biography of Vilatte, but a polemical catalogue of early Independent Catholic bishops. Brandreth, an English Anglican clergyman, was asked to prepare a report for Anglican authorities in 1939 on 'episcopi vagantes', a derogatory term first applied to the English Independent Catholic archbishop Arnold Harris Mathew.<sup>35</sup> The two key questions Brandreth set out to address were: who are these people, and how should Anglicans be dealing with them?<sup>36</sup> He was not interested in Vilatte as a historian, but merely as the originator of contemporary Independent Catholicism. Brandreth's organisation is simple: a brief, broadly-painted sketch of the key originators of Independent Catholic episcopal lineages, including Vilatte, followed by lists of who consecrated whom and when. Brandreth's sketch of Vilatte is drafted in language that undermines Vilatte's reputation.

Although he claims that his account is objective,<sup>37</sup> Brandreth's description of Vilatte follows closely Grafton's claims that he was an adventurer and a charlatan. Without citing evidence, Brandreth claims that Vilatte actively concealed his personal history from Mar Alvares in order to acquire consecration.<sup>38</sup> Brandreth also disparages Mar

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<sup>35</sup> Mathew was active from his consecration in 1908 until shortly before his death in 1919. See also: Alan M. Cole, *The Old Catholic Phenomenon* (London: Avon Books, 1997), pp. 42-60.

<sup>36</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, pp. vii, xix, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, p. vii.

<sup>38</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, p. 33. A report in *The Catholic Advance* in October 1912, makes the same claim. 'Vilatte concealed or denied his relation to the Bishop of Fond du Lac and thus obtained the consecration by fraudulent means': 'Wants Episcopal Honors', *The Catholic Advance*, 26 October 1912, p. 5. Grafton sent a

Alvares, suggesting that his own orders were doubtful, and that he too should be classified as an *episcopus vagans*.<sup>39</sup> Having framed Vilatte's orders as dubious, Brandreth concludes that his episcopal acts, and those of bishops claiming descent from Vilatte, were invalid,<sup>40</sup> and that the movement as a whole was a 'light-hearted trafficking in holy things'.<sup>41</sup> Although plainly biased, and written by a clergyman of a competing denomination to serve its own purposes, Brandreth's work was and remains influential, because it was the first attempt to describe and categorise Independent Catholics.

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telegram to Alvares in which he urged him not to consecrate Vilatte. Stephen de Silva, a trustee of the church in Colombo, and a close associate of Mar Alvares, wrote to Grafton on 5 September 1891. 'I am perfectly acquainted with the history of our much esteemed Father Vilatte and I count it a pleasure on my part to defend a persecuted priest of the ancient and Apostolic Church. I have studied closely the correspondence between you and Father Vilatte which appeared in some of the American papers.' This letter is in the archive of the Diocese of Fond du Lac, and de Silva sent a copy to the *Green Bay Press Gazette*, and asked them to publish it, which they did: 'An Old Catholic Bishop', *Green Bay Press Gazette*, 8 October 1891, p. 3. A. A. De Souza, Mar Alvares' Vicar General, wrote a response to Grafton on 4 September on Mar Alvares' orders. In it he decried Grafton's un-Christian behaviour, and re-iterated that Vilatte would be consecrated 'even if he were the only Old Catholic in America': Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, A. A. De Souza to Grafton, 4 September 1891, in French and English. It is likely that Vilatte took the originals with him to Ceylon for them to be examined by Alvares and other church authorities, which would explain, in part, how they were aware of the details of the situation. It is clear from items in *The Independent Catholic* that letters and newspaper clippings flowed freely between Colombo and the Old Catholic mission in Wisconsin while Vilatte was in Ceylon. Mar Alvares, in a letter to Fr. Ignatius on 21 November 1898, referred to the letters, as well as Grafton's telegram. 'On inquiry, from parties disinterested, and from facts patent to us, we found to our full satisfaction, that Bishop Grafton was only trying to pay off a private grudge': 'Mar Timotheos's Consecration', *Western Mail*, 7 January 1899, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, p. vii.

Peter Anson's *Bishops At Large* is an updated and expanded version of Brandreth's work. He introduces his project by describing his long-time interest in obscure religious bodies.

But I had never thought of compiling a catalogue, so to say, of the innumerable bodies, all claiming to be Catholic and apostolic, boasting that their bishops and priests have valid orders, which have sprung up like mushrooms both in Europe and North America since the eighteen-sixties, until Mr Charles Monteith of Faber and Faber (at the suggestion of Mr Arthur Calder-Marshall) asked in the spring of 1961 if I would care to do so.<sup>42</sup>

Calder-Marshall's *The Enthusiast* is a biography of Fr. Ignatius, which Faber & Faber published in 1962. It includes a scandalous chapter on Vilatte and his relationship with the monks at Llanthony Abbey.<sup>43</sup> Not knowing where to begin, or if there was enough material to work with, Anson turned to Brandreth, who became his willing collaborator.<sup>44</sup> Anson dedicated his book to Brandreth. Calder-Marshall dedicated his book to Anson. There is therefore, a link not only in the themes of these two

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<sup>42</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Enthusiast: An Enquiry Into The Life Beliefs and Character of The Rev. Joseph Leicester Lyne Alias Fr. Ignatius, O.S.B., Abbot of Elm Hill, Norwich and Llanthony Wales* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962). For the chapter on Vilatte, see pages 253-264. Calder-Marshall's book was published before Anson's. Anson cites him on at least one occasion: Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 114.

<sup>44</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 21-22.

works - an accounting of quirky and troublesome Christian sects from the perspectives of adherents of larger churches - but also between the authors, who were known to one another, and who shared a particular understanding of ecclesiology.

Anson emphasises that his book is about schism.<sup>45</sup> This is a common theme between all three books. Brandreth views Independent Catholics as dissident Roman Catholics. Calder-Marshall's biography of Ignatius is a study of one dissident Anglo-Catholic, who, because Vilatte ordained him, entered fully into schism.<sup>46</sup> Anson argues that Independent Catholic schism was not rooted in principled points of doctrine or reform, as was the case with historical schisms such as the Reformation, rather it was grounded in dissatisfaction with matters of organisation and polity. 'Few of the bodies dealt with in these pages were the outcome of theological scruples; almost all arose because the founders found fault with the particular organisation to which they belonged and wanted to remedy the situation.'<sup>47</sup> Anson presents Vilatte in just this light. 'Throughout his long life Vilatte was always

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<sup>45</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 24.

<sup>46</sup> Brandreth's work ought to be seen in context with the Anglicans building stronger ties to the Old Catholics of the Continent. Cross' 2011 thesis shows, in part, how this was pursued by some within the Church of England: Anthony John Cross, 'Père Hyacinthe Loyson, the Eglise Catholique Gallicane (1879-1893) and the Anglican Reform Mission' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Reading, 2011). Calder-Marshall, in his dedication of *The Enthusiast*, frames it as a hope for Christian reunion. Anson and Brandreth criticise Independent Catholics for their idealism regarding Christian reunion.

<sup>47</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 24.

interested more in ecclesiastical politics than in the dogmatic or spiritual aspects of religion. He never had the slightest scruples about changing his allegiance from one denomination according to the circumstances in which he found himself at the moment.<sup>48</sup> Anson believed that there was no substance to Vilatte's career trajectory, only disgruntled opportunism, which he used to lead others into schism. In fact, as this thesis will argue, the evidence shows Vilatte's consistent concern with practical ministry to otherwise alienated Catholics and principled disagreement with contemporary Roman Catholic doctrine and ecclesiology.

Anson does not appear to have acquired significant additional source material about Vilatte. Covering Vilatte's career up to his consecration in 1892, Anson relies heavily on Mar Georgius'<sup>49</sup> edition of *My Relations with the Protestant Episcopal Church*.<sup>50</sup> This was originally written by Vilatte: an edition, now lost, was published in the United States after his death in 1930. Mar Georgius annotated and republished a further edition in 1960. Parisot's biography contains significant material found in *My Relations with the Protestant Episcopal Church*. Brandreth did not have a copy when he wrote his original sketch, but he did have a copy of Parisot. Anson thanks Monsignor Joseph Marx, noting that 'the chapter devoted to Joseph René Vilatte

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<sup>48</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 94.

<sup>49</sup> Mar Georgius (Hugh de Willmott Newman, 1905-1979) was the leader of a British Independent Catholic body now called the British Orthodox Church.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, *My Relations With the Protestant Episcopal Church*, ed. by Mar Georgius (Glastonbury: Catholic Apostolic Church, 1960).

contains details of his escapades which have never been revealed so far.<sup>51</sup> Marx's work will be covered below; however, it is worth noting here that there is very little in Anson's account that is revelatory and can be exclusively attributed to Marx.<sup>52</sup> Anson does not mention or cite Marx's published work, and his note on page 111 suggests that the two men corresponded while Anson prepared his book. Marx would only have supplied Anson with material relating to Vilatte's relations with the Roman Catholics in Wisconsin. Though he does not, as he claimed, appear to have had access to a significantly expanded collection of source material, Anson's work on Vilatte uses Brandreth's original sources and does fill out Brandreth's earlier biographical sketch.

Between October 1941 and July 1942 Monsignor Joseph Marx and Reverend Benjamin Blied collaborated on four essays about Vilatte in the *Salesianum*, the journal of Saint Francis de Sales Roman Catholic seminary in Wisconsin. The essays sequentially cover distinct periods of Vilatte's career from its beginnings in Wisconsin until his death in France in 1929. Marx opens with 'The Old Catholics in America',<sup>53</sup> an introduction to Old Catholicism, and its arrival in the United States.

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<sup>51</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> Only the material covering Vilatte's 1894 attempt at reconciliation can be attributed to Marx; Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>53</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', pp. 155-161.

The next two essays 'Joseph René Vilatte'<sup>54</sup> and 'Archbishop Vilatte'<sup>55</sup> cover his career. The final essay, 'Vilatte and the Catholic Church'<sup>56</sup> explores Vilatte's complicated relations with the Roman Catholic church. Marx has been credited with having extensive knowledge of Vilatte, the 'self-styled "archbishop and primate of the old Catholic Church in America," whose heretical teachings in Door County peninsula originally brought the Norbertine Order to this area'.<sup>57</sup> Archbishop Sebastian Messmer, who had personal dealings with Vilatte, and perceived him as a rival in the mission field, ordained Marx in June, 1902. Marx served as Messmer's private secretary from 1902 until either 1905, when he was assigned a parish, or 1907 when he went to study in Jerusalem. Marx was interested in the history of the local Roman Catholic community, publishing a necrology of Green Bay Roman Catholic clergy in 1939. Marx's interest no doubt stems from the fact that Vilatte featured in the recollections of Messmer, Abbot Bernard Pennings, and others as a cautionary tale of schism and pride.

Marx's first essay promises to discuss 'The Old Catholics In America'.<sup>58</sup> Marx begins with a sweeping summary of the emergence of European Old Catholics. The

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<sup>54</sup> Marx, 'J. R. Vilatte', pp. 1-8.

<sup>55</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', pp. 59-67.

<sup>56</sup> Marx, 'Vilatte and Rome', pp. 113-120.

<sup>57</sup> 'Msgr. Marx Dies; Was Vicar General', *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 17 January 1967, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', pp. 155-161.

'new sect' of German nationalist Catholics arose because 'in Germany, the power of the bishops was exalted at the expense of the pope'.<sup>59</sup> Through successive annual meetings the Old Catholics 'became progressively more Protestant'.<sup>60</sup> Some American Roman Catholic bishops attending Vatican I disapproved of papal infallibility but would not countenance schism, unlike the Germans. Marx believes that they would not give ear to such '[h]eretical vagaries and fantastic systems'.<sup>61</sup> Though there were independentist parishes in the United States, none had the stomach for joining the Old Catholics because of their reverence for the pope.<sup>62</sup> Marx blames the 'infection' of Old Catholicism in America on the Belgian laity, who were quarrelsome, refused to support Catholic schools, leaned towards socialism, and had become very lax Catholics.<sup>63</sup> The healing of a tavern keeper's wife by a spiritualist completes the stage for Vilatte's arrival. On 22 June 1885, partisans of the spiritualist challenged the local Roman Catholic priest to prove his claim that his presence at their seances would prevent any communication with the dead. His refusal to participate 'led forty families to organize their own church - a sufficient comment on their faith.'<sup>64</sup> Onto this stage 'strutted the grandiose actor'<sup>65</sup> Vilatte who infected America with the heretical Old Catholic movement, and used it 'to deceive the

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<sup>59</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 155.

<sup>60</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 156.

<sup>61</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 157.

<sup>62</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 157.

<sup>63</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 161.

<sup>64</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 161.

<sup>65</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 161.



unlettered'<sup>66</sup> and to flatter his own renegade ambitions.<sup>67</sup> Marx says nothing about Old Catholicism in America, other than that were it not for the failures of the Belgian laity, and the deception of Vilatte, it would never have been seeded in Wisconsin. Marx has set the stage of his version of Vilatte's story over the next three essays, but he has also revealed, at the outset, his own opinions not only about Old Catholicism, but also about Vilatte.

The second essay, a biographical sketch of Vilatte up to his consecration in 1892, is framed as Vilatte's search for adventure.<sup>68</sup> In this, he was led astray by two notorious schismatics, Charles Chiniquy<sup>69</sup> and Hyacinthe Loyson.<sup>70</sup> After his ordination in 1885, Vilatte led the Belgian immigrants in Little Sturgeon into schism. After a number of years of 'meagre success' Vilatte decided that his two or three 'ridiculously small' parishes needed their own bishop, 'and he would gladly assume that colourful responsibility.'<sup>71</sup> Marx and Blied make no mention of the high regard the Episcopalians who saw him in the mission field had for Vilatte during this period. Likewise there is no mention of the later friction between Vilatte and Grafton. Nor do they detail the interactions between Vilatte, Utrecht, and Grafton

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<sup>66</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 157.

<sup>67</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 157.

<sup>68</sup> Marx, 'J. R. Vilatte', p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Marx, 'J. R. Vilatte', pp. 1-2.

<sup>70</sup> Marx, 'J. R. Vilatte', pp. 2-3.

<sup>71</sup> Marx, 'J. R. Vilatte', p. 4.

that resulted in Mar Alvares consecrating Vilatte in 1892. They impress upon readers that the church in India was riven with heresy and schism, and represent Mar Alvares as an apostate.<sup>72</sup> Vilatte, in their characterisation ever the ecclesiastical politician, 'had a genius for learning about troubled waters anywhere', and profiting from them.<sup>73</sup> Though he was not a wealthy man, Vilatte could accumulate the necessary funds, when the desire for adventure and travel seized him.<sup>74</sup> With \$225 in donations, he set off for Colombo. 'Vilatte had attained the episcopate — not only that; he was archbishop with the rank of metropolitan!'<sup>75</sup> Marx and Blied want their readers to be as scandalised as they were about Vilatte. Not only did he lead ignorant immigrants into schism, but because of his pride, Vilatte also managed to usurp the authority of the Pope, and illicitly acquire consecration.

'Archbishop Vilatte'<sup>76</sup> the third essay in Marx and Blied's series, examines Vilatte's archiepiscopal career, and ends with his having submitted to the Roman Church in 1925 a few years before his death in 1929. Marx and Blied continue to develop their portrait of Vilatte as an attention-seeking opportunist. Immediately after his consecration Vilatte 'set out for home, but few were the festivities held in his honor. Ironically enough, none would have appreciated throngs of reverent admirers

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<sup>72</sup> Marx, 'J. R. Vilatte', pp. 6-7.

<sup>73</sup> Marx, 'J. R. Vilatte', p. 7

<sup>74</sup> Marx, 'J. R. Vilatte', p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Marx, 'J. R. Vilatte', p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', pp. 59-67.

more than the affable Vilatte.<sup>77</sup> They repeat Grafton's unsubstantiated claim that Vilatte sold ordinations, and claim that his loss of money from the Episcopalians, and the inability to sell enough ordinations, made it difficult for him to make headway in the mission field in Wisconsin.<sup>78</sup> With the hostility from Grafton,<sup>79</sup> and the efforts of Bishop Messmer to suppress his heretical teaching,<sup>80</sup> Vilatte was losing money, and turned to take advantage of the troubled immigrant Poles.<sup>81</sup> Attracted once again to other places with religious troubles, Vilatte 'went to Paris, for his delicate ears had heard of the Masonic machinations there. He tried to organize a schismatic church, but his financial problems were such that his regalia was seized to cover debts, and very soon, "His Excellency" was found in Chicago organizing parishes and publishing a paper.'<sup>82</sup> In the end, Vilatte 'the restless soul departed this

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<sup>77</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', p. 59. An account in the *Green Bay Weekly Gazette*, described Vilatte's return from Ceylon: 'The Old Catholics of Red River, Waukegan, Green Bay and Sturgeon Bay mustered strong and a long procession of buggies and wagons crowded with people, with banners flying, assembled at Luxemburg before 7 a.m. to escort their chief pastor to his home again...The greatest enthusiasm prevailed': 'An Enthusiastic Reception To Archbishop Vilatte', *Green Bay Weekly Gazette*, 17 August 1892, p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', pp. 61, 66. Simony is a very serious charge, and one would expect evidence to have been offered had there been any. Grafton provided no evidence for his claim, and neither did later authors namely Marx and Anson. If there was contemporary evidence supporting Grafton's charge, one would reasonably expect that when Vilatte negotiated with the Roman Church in 1894, 1899 and 1925, it would have prejudiced his position. It seems very likely that the Vatican would have investigated these claims.

<sup>79</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', p. 61.

<sup>80</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', p. 62.

<sup>81</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', p. 63.

<sup>82</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', p. 67. While there is no indication that Vilatte had links with the French Masons, Marx appears to take the line of the Society of Militant Catholics,

life in union with Rome and at peace with God.’<sup>83</sup> The emphasis in this essay is not Vilatte and his archiepiscopal career. Rather it depicts the victory of Roman Catholic orthodoxy over the attempts of the heresiarch to lead immigrants and native peoples in Canada into schism.<sup>84</sup>

Marx believed that ‘Vilatte was an ecclesiastical politician, so his doctrine wobbled like the amorphous jelly.’<sup>85</sup> This underlies Marx’s approach to Vilatte’s interactions with the Roman Catholic church. But even without Marx’s interpretation and limited sources Vilatte’s relations with the Roman Catholic Church remain a puzzle. Even now, available source material detailing his thinking with regard to the Roman Catholic church is incomplete, making an accurate narrative and analysis challenging. Throughout the series Marx sacrifices accuracy for a caricature of Vilatte vacillating, and waiting for better, more profitable opportunities, his judgement clouded by pride and theological ignorance.<sup>86</sup> Marx believed that Vilatte’s troubled relationship with Rome was not about theological ideals, but Vilatte’s desire for recognition of his episcopal status.<sup>87</sup> Personal pride and profit hold a key position in

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which posted anti-Vilatte placards in the neighbourhood of Parc Monceau in the run up to Vilatte’s first liturgy in Paris in 1907. They describe the organisation of the new congregation as ‘prepared with the secrecy characteristic of the Free Masons’: ‘Clericals Assault Schismatic Church’, *New York Herald*, 27 January 1907, p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> Marx, ‘Abp. Vilatte’, p. 67.

<sup>84</sup> Marx, ‘Abp. Vilatte’, p. 66.

<sup>85</sup> Marx, ‘Vilatte and Rome’, p. 113.

<sup>86</sup> Marx, ‘Vilatte and Rome’, p. 113.

<sup>87</sup> Marx, ‘Vilatte and Rome’, p. 117.

Marx's explanation. The effect is that key facts are omitted or misrepresented. When Vilatte approached the Roman Catholic hierarchy in 1894, for example, it was at the behest of his people,<sup>88</sup> a request they later regretted, when they wrote to Bishop Messmer: 'We deplore bitterly to have caused our Archbishop to make overtures to you and we promise that in future we shall give better heed to his advice.'<sup>89</sup> Marx cites the letter, but because he wants to present Vilatte as a sole operator, disconnected from the life of any Catholic community, he omits any reference to this essential passage.<sup>90</sup> Marx's account of Vilatte's final submission and death is also problematic. Vilatte, he writes, settled in a cottage on the monastery grounds at Pont Colbert on 6 June 1925, but did not submit until the following year. 'Divine Providence had decreed the next year to be his year of grace, for it was then that he retracted in *La Croix* and was absolved by the papal nuntio [*sic*], Cardinal Ceretti.'<sup>91</sup> *La Croix* actually published Vilatte's submission on 23 June 1925, reporting that he had done so on the first of the month.<sup>92</sup> Vilatte died a few years later, while still in residence at Pont Colbert. Marx reports that when he died, Vilatte was buried as a layman, Rome having refused to recognise his orders.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Vilatte's attempts to reconcile with the Roman Catholic Church in 1894, 1899 and 1925 are the subject of chapter 8.

<sup>89</sup> Author's private collection [hereinafter AT Collection], Letters, Nicholas Pleimling to Bishop Sebastian Messmer, 7 August 1894.

<sup>90</sup> Marx, 'Vilatte and Rome', p. 115.

<sup>91</sup> Marx, 'Vilatte and Rome', p. 119.

<sup>92</sup> 'Une grande conversion', *La Croix*, 23 June 1925, p. 1.

<sup>93</sup> Marx, 'Vilatte and Rome', p. 119.

Marx's essays are not academic studies. However, until now, because so little research has been done on Vilatte and his career, they have been treated as authoritative - in part due to Marx's reputation as an expert witness of Vilatte's activity, and in part because they continue to develop the preceding, overwhelmingly negative, narrative established by Grafton, Brandreth and Anson. Unfortunately, these essays contain a number of significant errors. For example, Marx states that Parisot was an Old Catholic, when in fact he was Roman Catholic.<sup>94</sup> The error suggests that Marx had not read Parisot's biography of Vilatte. He also states that there is no evidence that Vilatte established a colony in Mexico.<sup>95</sup> The project was widely reported, as was the fact that Vilatte had to abandon the site in Candelaria due to the Mexican Revolution.<sup>96</sup> Marx's essays are propaganda. They celebrate the triumph of Roman Catholic orthodoxy over the heretical Independent Catholicism of Vilatte. Like the sympathetic Parisot, they are a cautionary tale, that schism from the Roman Catholic Church is futile, as Vilatte learned, when before it was too late, he submitted to good sense and died at peace with the Church. Marx's essays are valuable not because of their authority, which is not deserved, but because they express an attitude, a position taken towards Vilatte that Marx reinforced and

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<sup>94</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', p. 62.

<sup>95</sup> Marx, 'Abp. Vilatte', p. 67.

<sup>96</sup> 'Colonize Mexico', *Bennington Banner*, 31 October 1910, p. 7; 'Greek Church Buys 50,000 Acres For Colony Purposes In Mexico' *El Paso Herald*, 13 June 1910, p. 11; see also Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, p. 180, for an image of a postcard Vilatte sent from Mexico describing the challenges of travelling at the time.

has become the norm ever since.

Most of the published material about Vilatte focusses on what he did in the United States and Britain. Émile Appolis wrote three essays exploring the development of Old and Independent Catholicism in France up to the 1950s. The first, 'Une Petite Secte d'Aujourd'Hui: L'Eglise Catholique Apostolique et Gallican',<sup>97</sup> surveys the development of the Catholic Apostolic Church in France which began with Bishop Paolo Miraglia's consecration of Jules Husseye in 1906<sup>98</sup> and Vilatte's work in Paris in 1907 where he ordained Louis-Marie-François Giraud to the priesthood.<sup>99</sup> The essay does not focus on Vilatte, but on the French organisers such as Houssaye, Giraud, and Jean Bricaud, as well as their esoteric leanings which are not a focus of this project. Appolis' second essay, 'Le Vieux-Catholicisme en France',<sup>100</sup> published in 1956, is a broad survey of Old Catholics in the country including Hyacinthe Loyson and Eugène Michaud both of whom, in their own ways, played a significant role in shaping Vilatte's ideas about Catholic reform. Vilatte is mentioned but he is not a central figure. Finally, 'En marge de la Séparation: les

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<sup>97</sup> Émile Appolis, 'Une Petite Secte D'Aujourd'hui: L'Eglise Catholique Apostolique Et Gallicane', *Actes du 77e Congrès des sociétés savantes* (Grenoble 1952), 573-589.

<sup>98</sup> Appolis, 'Une Petite Secte D'Aujourd'hui', p. 576. Vilatte consecrated Miraglia in Piacenza, Italy on 6 May 1900.

<sup>99</sup> Appolis, 'Une Petite Secte D'Aujourd'hui', p. 575.

<sup>100</sup> Émile Appolis, 'Le Vieux-Catholicisme En France', *Actes du 81e Congrès national des sociétés savantes* (Rouen-Caen 1956), 773-787.

associations culturelles schismatiques',<sup>101</sup> published in 1963, is the most useful for this project. It is an account of the events and personalities surrounding the 1905 separation of Church and State and, with Vilatte's help, the establishment of the French Independent Catholic movement. Appolis also examines the conditions surrounding Vilatte's return to France in 1923 and his submission to Rome two years later. This latter section is especially important to chapter eight of this thesis. Appolis used Parisot in 1952 and 1956, and Brandreth in 1963. His interest was in French Catholic sects rather than criticising Vilatte. Appolis' work is not cited in Thériault or Seraphim, although they published later. He brings a number of new sources to light throughout all three essays, including letters and newspaper accounts.

Marx and Blied mostly passed over the bitter feud that Grafton carried on with Vilatte between 1890 and Grafton's death in 1912 in favour of a Roman Catholic perspective. William Hogue's essay, 'The Episcopal Church And Archbishop Vilatte',<sup>102</sup> covers the feud in detail. Published within a few years of Anson's book, what sets Hogue's work apart from Anson and Marx is his almost exclusive use of the material held in the Fond du Lac diocesan archive. This did not however, lead him to view Vilatte and Vilatte's successors any differently from the other authors reviewed above. Grafton attacked Vilatte's Catholicity from the start of his

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<sup>101</sup> Émile Appolis, 'En marge de la Séparation : les associations culturelles schismatiques', *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France*, 49 (1963), 47-88.

<sup>102</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church And Vilatte', pp. 35-55.



archiepiscopal ministry in the United States.<sup>103</sup> This was not because of any flaw with Vilatte's consecration, but because of Grafton's own agenda and ecclesial outlook, something Hogue does not address.<sup>104</sup> Grafton's anger was such that he harried Vilatte from the General Convention in 1892, in the American press, in the British press, and in Ceylon. Grafton was determined that no Catholic body should recognise Vilatte.<sup>105</sup> While Hogue's treatment is better sourced, and more academic in style than the others, his description of Vilatte as a 'Pandora's box of troubles'<sup>106</sup> and an illegitimate turncoat, who made 'numerous and opportunistic changes of ecclesiastical allegiance'<sup>107</sup> only reinforces the negative picture of Vilatte originally painted by Grafton in 1898,<sup>108</sup> and taken up by Brandreth, Anson and Marx.

Not all of the published sources on Vilatte are antagonistic, however: two, *Flesh of Our Brethren* and *Msgr. René Vilatte Organizer of Religion 1854-1929*, were written by Independent Catholic bishops and seek to counter Brandreth, Anson, and Marx's version and to rehabilitate Vilatte. Abba Seraphim, the head of the British Orthodox Church, published *Flesh of Our Brethren*<sup>109</sup> in which he argues that while it was a

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<sup>103</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church And Vilatte', p. 50.

<sup>104</sup> A point discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>105</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church And Vilatte', pp. 51-2.

<sup>106</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church And Vilatte', p. 35.

<sup>107</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church And Vilatte', p. 52.

<sup>108</sup> Charles C. Grafton, 'Statement Concerning Vilatte', *The Diocese of Fond du Lac*, October 1898, pp. 5-7.

<sup>109</sup> Abba Seraphim, *Flesh of Our Brethren* (London: British Orthodox Press, 2006).

mistake, and ought not to have happened, the unusual consecrations of four westerners, Jules Ferrette,<sup>110</sup> Antonio Francisco Xavier Alvares,<sup>111</sup> Joseph René Vilatte,<sup>112</sup> and Theodosius Stephanus de Nemeth,<sup>113</sup> deserve to be seen in their context.<sup>114</sup> Ferrette, Alvares, and Vilatte had direct links to Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV. The patriarch had, for the period, an exceptionally outward-looking perspective,<sup>115</sup> which no doubt shaped his willingness to reach beyond the traditional Syrian Orthodox heartlands to Europe and North America. The Patriarch, in order to wrest control of his churches in India from Anglican interference, travelled to London in 1874, and did not return until the following year, when he had successfully acquired the support of Queen Victoria herself. His advisors had to restrain him from travelling again, aged 93, to attend the Old Catholic congress in Lucerne, 1892, arguing that he had only just recovered from a severe case of influenza.<sup>116</sup> Seraphim's principal interest in his work is what led to the unusual circumstances of Vilatte's consecration. He covers how Vilatte arrived in Green Bay and his establishment of the Old Catholic mission under Grafton's predecessor

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<sup>110</sup> Consecrated by the then Metropolitan Julius (Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV) in 1866.

<sup>111</sup> Consecrated by Mar Dionysius in Kottayam in 1889.

<sup>112</sup> Consecrated by Mar Alvares in Colombo in 1892.

<sup>113</sup> Consecrated by Patriarch Ignatius Ephraim in Homs in 1933.

<sup>114</sup> Seraphim, *Flesh of Our Brethren*, p. 3.

<sup>115</sup> Seraphim, *Flesh of Our Brethren*, p. 34.

<sup>116</sup> Oswald Hutton Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery, Being the Record Of A Visit To The Head Quarters Of The Syrian Church In Mesopotamia, With Some Account Of The Yazidis Or Devil Worshippers Of Mosul And El Jilwah, Their Sacred Book* (London: Horace Cox, 1895), p. 68.

Bishop Brown. This parallels closely Parisot, Brandreth and Anson's accounts.

Seraphim gives a detailed account of Vilatte's troubled relations with Grafton. Their relationship was complicated by the influence of the then Archbishop of Utrecht, Jan Heykamp, who rejected Anglican orders, and urged Vilatte to sever his ties to Grafton. The tragedy is that Vilatte did not want to do this but did as he was instructed by the Dutch leaders of the European Old Catholic movement, assured that he and his mission would not be abandoned. In the end, however, they did abandon Vilatte and his congregations, leaving them to fend for themselves.

Seraphim maintains that Vilatte was not an adventurer, but that he had a vision of Orthodoxy which he believed could address real pastoral problems in the American mid-west. It is no surprise then, contrary to Brandreth and Anson's claims against it, that Seraphim reports that the Patriarch of his own accord authorised Vilatte's consecration in 1892. Like Brandreth and Anson, Seraphim's work is not an academic study, and it suffers from an occasional lack of source criticism, traceability, and factual errors. These problems do not however, diminish the overall value of *Flesh of Our Brethren* as a modern attempt to re-frame Vilatte's story, and give him a context other than as an antagonist of 'authentic' Catholic bishops.

Serge Thériault's *Msgr. René Vilatte Community Organizer of Religion, 1854-1929*, strives to be a 'comprehensive study' of Vilatte's activity in relation to his founding

role of the Community Organisation of Religion.<sup>117</sup> Thériault, an Independent Catholic bishop in Canada, asserts that Vilatte was the first bishop elected by, and consecrated for, the Community Organisation of Religion, which is not correct.<sup>118</sup> The Community Organisation of Religion did not exist at the time, and Vilatte does not mention it (or his intention to organise it) in his letters, publications or interviews. Thériault assembles a jumble of disparate communities and ideas from the period to create the idea of the Community Organisation of Religion before its time: especially relevant among these are Charles Chiniquy's experimental Independent Catholic community, before it joined the Presbyterians in 1860, and Vilatte's community, and the synod that elected him in 1889.<sup>119</sup> The actual organisation, the International Council of Community Churches, was not formed until 1950, and the Canadian branch, Thériault's principal interest, in 1983.<sup>120</sup> This mis-statement, however, exemplifies Thériault's strained attempt to read backward into Vilatte's history later developments of special interest to the author. Thériault's work, however, is the first modern, and widely available biography of Vilatte written from an Independent Catholic perspective. He makes an effort to not only break out of the mould of Brandreth and Anson, he also tries to situate Vilatte in a context - the

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<sup>117</sup> Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>118</sup> Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, p. 40.

<sup>119</sup> Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, pp. 35-6, 40; Caroline B. Brettell, 'From Catholics to Presbyterians: French-Canadian Immigrants in Central Illinois', *American Presbyterians*, 63 (1985), 285-298, (p. 292).

<sup>120</sup> Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, pp. 26, 35-6.

desire for Christian reunion and cooperation. Unfortunately, Thériault's work suffers from stretching the facts over a framework that they simply do not fit. However, his work should not be dismissed out of hand not least for the wealth of new traceable information that he makes available.

So little research has been done on Vilatte and the history of early Independent Catholicism that it is fair to say that these sources represent the whole body of work. Of all of the sources discussed here, Brandreth and Anson are the most influential. Thériault and Seraphim are Independent Catholic responses to Anson. They strive to rehabilitate Vilatte, and to situate him in a context, although in this Seraphim is more successful than Thériault. Their work is largely unknown outside of the Independent Catholic community. There is a notable forty year gap between the publication of Anson, and the publication of Seraphim's *Flesh of Our Brethren*. Anson's *Bishops At Large* has been treated as the definitive account of Vilatte's career and motives since its publication in 1962. The existing sources provide useful dates and names and point to primary material such as letters and newspaper reports. Most, like Anson, are burdened with the opinions and judgements of men who began by asserting the inferiority of Vilatte and his cause, and the superiority of their own denominations. The attitudes of the sources deemed authoritative is such that Vilatte's story, and Independent Catholicism as a whole, have generally not been taken seriously or represented objectively. Add to this the apparent lack of material to work with, and it

is easy to see why there has been no further interest in the subject.

The apparent lack of material, lack of interest, and the assumption that the story has already been fully investigated pose a challenge for researchers interested in the history not only of early Independent Catholicism, but also of what light Vilatte's story might cast on other issues of the period, such as the history of missions in the United States amongst immigrant populations, late nineteenth and early twentieth century Christian reunion ideas and efforts, as well as progressive Catholicism. Vilatte is interesting because his was the first Old Catholic mission organised outside of the Swiss and German Old Catholic heartlands. And it was done during a period when the European Old Catholics were forging their own identity in Europe, undertaking Catholic reform, and negotiating relationships with themselves and with other churches such as the Anglicans and the Orthodox. They were not prepared to expand into the potentially fruitful virgin mission field of North America. There appears to be very little research on this time-period in English, and what is available is dated. Thus, Vilatte's story is part of not just the emergence of what we now call Independent Catholicism, but he and his mission inadvertently played a role in the evolution of European Old Catholic identity. Vilatte, like Michaud, Loyson, and Döllinger, opposed the decisions of Vatican I. Anyone interested in studying that period, and the responses to Vatican I would find Vilatte's approach after 1890, when his mission shifted from a local or regional mission

project to a national Catholic Church, interesting, but before now there has not been enough material about Vilatte's own thinking to work with. Vilatte was not a scholar but a campaigner and missionary. Thus, unlike the American professor Charles Briggs who wrote about Christian reunion, and the German professor Ignaz von Döllinger and the French professor Eugène Michaud who wrote about Vatican I, and Catholic reform, material documenting Vilatte's thinking is scattered across a wide array of material, making it difficult to piece together into a whole programme. Between 1892 and 1924 Vilatte proved to be interesting enough to wider society to be interviewed, and quoted, and his activities widely reported, in Europe and in North America. The challenge for this project has been to overcome the problems of the existing sources, and break Vilatte out of their artificial frame in order to find new material, ask different questions, and fill in the holes of Vilatte's story.

### **Sources of New Material**

Twenty years ago, this project would not have been possible. Two issues impeded an in-depth exploration of Vilatte's career: obtaining access to known sources, and finding new material. Accessing archival material held within the Independent Catholic community, as well as institutional holdings such as university libraries and diocesan archives, then required negotiation and extensive travel. Library holdings of, for example, newspapers were limited to regional titles and incomplete

collections. Discovering new material required a great deal of luck and hours of painstaking paging through newspapers and documents. Anson gives the impression that Brandreth's collection of material, upon which he based his work, was complete. He describes having arrived in Paris to meet with Brandreth, to prepare for his book:

When I arrived there I was confronted by such a pile of books, pamphlets, brochures, leaflets, and files of letters, that I hardly knew where to start. My host had been collecting all this data for more than a quarter of a century. I returned home with half a dozen notebooks filled with scribblings, doubtful if I should ever be able to reduce them into some kind of order.<sup>121</sup>

And both state that Vilatte was inactive for long periods of time.<sup>122</sup> The impression they gave was that there was no new information to find. This project will show, that in contrast, Vilatte was rarely inactive, and that recent developments in digitisation of material such as newspapers has allowed new material about Vilatte to be discovered, as well as complete texts previously known only through extracts.

Two physical collections, the archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Fond du Lac in Wisconsin, and of the British Orthodox Church in London, are the best known, and rarely accessed. The Fond du Lac collection spans 1884 to 1905. Much of the contents

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<sup>121</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>122</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, p. 35; Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 113, 126.



are letters, and a few copies of newsletters and pamphlets. The material post-1895 is not focussed on Vilatte as much as it is on the relations and activities of those who at one time or another were associated with him and his work. Until now, Hogue's work is the only source which used the material held in Fond du Lac. The British Orthodox collection includes Mar Georgius' edition of Vilatte's *My Relations with the Protestant Episcopal Church*: an important source, in Vilatte's voice, detailing his relationships with Bishops Brown and Grafton. Also in this collection are rare materials published by Vilatte, such as two *Old-Catholic Tracts for the Times*, one of which details the difference between Old Catholics and Episcopalians,<sup>123</sup> the other between Old Catholicism and ultramontaniam.<sup>124</sup> Neither of these appears to have been known by Brandreth, Anson or Marx.<sup>125</sup> Vilatte published the first edition of *A Sketch of the Belief of the Old Catholics* in 1890,<sup>126</sup> and occasionally published revised editions thereafter. Assembling a collection of these, made possible in part through access to these two archives, has been important for this project, and has made it possible to trace some elements of Vilatte's theological thinking throughout his career.

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<sup>123</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, *Differences Between Old-Catholics And Protestant Episcopalians*, Old-Catholic Tracts for the Times No. 2 (Chicago: n.d.). Although both of these are undated, Vilatte moved to Chicago after 1900.

<sup>124</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, *Differences Between Old-Catholics And Papalists*, Old-Catholic Tracts for the Times No. 1 (Chicago: n.d.).

<sup>125</sup> Marx compiled an incomplete listing of Vilatte's publications, describing them as 'of no consequence'; Marx, *Abp. Vilatte*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>126</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, *A Sketch of the Belief of the Old Catholics*, (Dyckesville, 1890).

A number of Independent Catholic individuals and communities have digitised some or all of their archival material, some of it relevant to Vilatte's career. L'Eglise Gallicane, the community once led by Giraud, and a product of Vilatte's work in France with Henri des Houx, has made a number of useful documents available on its website<sup>127</sup>, including early editions of *Le Gallican*<sup>128</sup> which detailed Vilatte's relationship with the community. Vilatte received these while he lived in Pont Colbert.<sup>129</sup> We know of Vilatte's interest because of another interesting collection of material made available by Phillip Garver. Held in the Municipal Library at Lyon are letters exchanged between Jean Bricaud and Vilatte between 1924 and Vilatte's death in 1929. The most interesting aspect of these exchanges is Vilatte's continued engagement with, and interest in, the burgeoning Independent Catholic movement even after his formal submission to Rome in 1925. These are two of the most significant collections, and there are others, mainly tracing ordinations and personal connections. As with all such collections, these can be ephemeral, and it is necessary to take care to verify the authenticity of documents and translations.

Large scale digitisation of newspapers provides a wealth of new or more complete source material. Regional newspapers, which are otherwise difficult to

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<sup>127</sup> <http://www.gallican.org/eglise.htm> [accessed 29 November 2016 - 11:10].

<sup>128</sup> <http://www.gallican.org/sommaire.htm> [accessed 29 November 2016 - 11:13].

<sup>129</sup> Phillip Garver (ed & transl.), *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte Paris 1924-1929* (2002), pp. 12, 13.

access, such as *Green Bay Weekly Gazette*, *The Door County Advocate*, and *Buffalo Courier-Record* are now easily available and searchable through free and subscription digital services. Some of these titles, such as the *Buffalo Courier-Record*, would not have otherwise been considered were it not for the search capabilities of digital services. Newspapers published in areas where Vilatte was active, such as Buffalo, Green Bay, Chicago, Paris, and Montreal, include contemporary opinion pieces. Articles reporting on Vilatte's involvement in various projects, such as a large peace rally in 1914,<sup>130</sup> fill out a picture of what he was doing, when and why, and often include quotes from Vilatte's speeches or his interactions with the reporter. Complete letters published in these newspapers from Vilatte, his supporters and his detractors, some previously only known through extracts, provide more information. Digitised newspapers allow researchers to track a story, not only in time, but also across regions, building a picture of what Vilatte was doing and when, who was interested and how it was being received. Three services, Newspapers.Com,<sup>131</sup> The British Newspaper Archive,<sup>132</sup> and Gallica,<sup>133</sup> made this possible.

Official documents, such as passport applications and census records were an unexpected and rich source of raw material. The British Orthodox archive, for

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<sup>130</sup> 'All Creeds to Be at Monster Peace Meet', *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 September 1914, p. 9.

<sup>131</sup> <http://www.newspapers.com>

<sup>132</sup> <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>

<sup>133</sup> <http://gallica.bnf.fr>

example, holds Parisian police surveillance reports about Vilatte.<sup>134</sup> Aside from these, few official documents are known or have circulated. Genealogy web services, such as Ancestry<sup>135</sup> provide a surprising wealth of material, such as Vilatte's United States naturalisation papers, his passport applications, and relevant census records. These sources refine the chronology of known events, fill in previously unknown details, and correct some existing narratives. They also provide photographs and details of his personal appearance over time; previously a rarity, as few photos of Vilatte and his inner circle are otherwise available. Vilatte's 1919 trip to Norway to ordain Kaud Knudsen is one forgotten and previously un-reported detail. It was not reported in his own publications, nor in newspapers of the day. His application for an emergency passport on 13 July 1898 in London proves that he and Fr. Ignatius were well acquainted before his trip to Britain in 1898, when he ordained Fr. Ignatius in Wales. This disproves the received narrative popularised by Ignatius that Vilatte's appearance at Llanthony was a miraculous answer to prayer.<sup>136</sup> Anson and Calder-Marshall use Vilatte's apparently sudden appearance at Llanthony Abbey to strengthen their opinion that Vilatte was a scoundrel seeking his own personal gain and that he took advantage of the feeble Fr. Ignatius.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Compiled in 1909 at the request of the Russian ambassador to Paris, probably because of Vilatte's connection to Russian Orthodox bishops, and perhaps because of the possible impact of Vilatte's progressive views on Russian immigrants in Paris.

<sup>135</sup> <http://www.ancestry.com>

<sup>136</sup> Baroness de Bertouch, *The Life of Father Ignatius O.S.B. The Monk of Llanthony* (London: Methuen & Co., 1904), p. 586.

<sup>137</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 114-117; Calder-Marshall, *The Enthusiast*, pp. 257-264.

## Project Map

The thesis is organised into three parts. The first explores what shaped Vilatte's vision of Catholic reform, and the second examines how he tried to realise it. Finally, although Vilatte interacted with individuals in a number of denominations, his relationships with the Syrian Orthodox Church in India, and with the Roman Catholic Church, were the most important and provide the focus of the the third and final part of the thesis. A new, and fuller biography of Vilatte is sorely needed, but this is not it. Rather it is an attempt to look at him and his career disentangled from the shape and expectations of existing biographical sketches, in the hope of opening a renewed discussion about Vilatte, his role in early Independent Catholicism, and his legacy to the modern movement that exists in Europe and North America.

Much of what has been published about Vilatte focuses on interpreting him through the lenses of other churches, namely the Roman Catholic and the Anglican. Vilatte is a largely silent figure in these sketches, leaving significant blocks of his experience unexplored. For example, what brought him to Old Catholicism, and what made him an avid campaigner for Catholic reform? Chapter two, 'The Making of A Catholic Reformer (1880-1885)', lays the foundation for an account of Vilatte's career post-1885 by exploring the issues and relationships that shaped his journey

towards an Old Catholic identity, and that would set him on the path to later establishing Independent Catholicism as an alternative stream of the late nineteenth century Old Catholic movement.

The popular image of Vilatte to date is that he had little interest in, or knowledge of, theology; however, on closer inspection, it is clear that although he was no gentleman scholar, he did maintain an un-changing theological core grounded in a Catholic identity. This identity, which Vilatte described as Catholicism without qualification<sup>138</sup> was independent of what he considered the heretical Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic definitions. Chapter three: 'Carving Out Independent Catholic Identity From Amongst Competing Catholicisms' explores these issues. Vilatte recognised that separating 'Catholic' from 'Roman Catholic' necessitated structural changes. Chapter four: 'Vilatte's Ecclesial Vision, An Attempt At Re-Shaping the Church' looks at how Vilatte's ideas of Catholic reform re-shaped the church, further distancing his vision of Catholicism from Roman Catholicism, and empowering a reformed Catholic church to respond to social changes and doctrinal development in the modern world.

Vilatte believed in Christian reunion. He was not, however, a romantic, nor did he harbour illusions that achieving it would happen quickly. He did believe that Christian reunion could only happen in the context of Catholicism, namely as a

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<sup>138</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 3.

product of Catholic reform. He was not alone in this: for example, the theologian Charles Briggs and the European Old Catholics had the same vision. Chapter five: 'Vilatte and Christian Reunion Through Catholic Reform' explores some aspects of contemporary ideas about christian reunion and Vilatte's reaction to them, as well as his own.

Vilatte was clearly not a typical episcopal character. He was foremost a missionary and campaigner. This is a pattern established early in his ecclesial career when he spent four years as a Protestant missionary in French-speaking settlements along the Canadian-American border. When he was ordained in 1885, Vilatte was the first Old Catholic priest in North America, and while at the time European Old Catholics were not interested in missions, Vilatte wanted to spread the word about Catholic reform. His consecration as Metropolitan in 1892 was unexpected, but it made a clear statement about the missionary nature of Vilatte's project. Chapter six: 'Introducing Independent Catholicism to America: 19th Century Church-building in Virgin Mission Field' explores the turn of the century missionary experience on the edge of American expansion, and how Vilatte put his theological foundations into practice, campaigning to establish Old Catholicism in the United States. This proved to be a boon for his detractors, who were accustomed to bishops remaining within an established place. It was, however, in keeping with the examples of Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV, and Mar Alvares, both of whom actively sought to reach beyond

the confines of traditional expectations.

Though they were not his only ecclesial relationships, Vilatte's connection to the Church in India, and his complicated relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, are central to any examination of his career and the subsequent emergence of Independent Catholicism. Chapter seven: 'Why Did the Syrian Church Consecrate Vilatte?', examines why Mar Alvares advocated Vilatte's cause to Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV, and why the Patriarch authorised Vilatte's consecration, not merely as bishop, but, to everyone's surprise, as metropolitan. Mar Alvares and Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV seem to have found a kindred spirit in Vilatte. Neither man was risk-averse; indeed there are parallels between Vilatte's post-1892 activities and the careers of both. After the Patriarch's death in 1894, Vilatte continued to correspond with Mar Dionysius, the senior metropolitan in India, though at the moment there does not appear to be any evidence that he and Mar Alvares were in contact with one another once Vilatte returned to the United States. Vilatte's relations with other Syrian Orthodox hierarchs remained in the background throughout his career, but his troubled relationship with the Roman Catholic Church was very public. His campaign against Romanism<sup>139</sup> and his missionary efforts to spread the Independent

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<sup>139</sup> This is a controversial and potentially derogatory term, but it is one that Vilatte used and for this reason I have, where appropriate, also used it. It is important, therefore, to understand the sense in which Vilatte appears to have used the term, and thus the sense in which it is used in this thesis. There are two possible sources informing Vilatte's own use and understanding of *romanism*; firstly, during his period as a Protestant missionary he would have been familiar with its usage as a broad anti-Catholic term; and secondly, Vilatte approved of Michaud's writing, and Michaud



Catholic message he shared with Mar Alvares, make Vilatte's attempt at reconciliation with Rome in 1899, and his final reconciliation in 1925, all the more perplexing. Until now the traditional narrative has been that he grew tired of being an outsider, and sought reconciliation with the Roman Church in order to bring an end to his religious adventure. Chapter eight: 'Why Vilatte Reconciled With Rome; Or Did He?' shows that contrary to the canonical accounts, it was not Vilatte who approached Rome, but Rome that sought to silence Vilatte, and that his final reconciliation might have been undone had he lived longer. This project shows that Vilatte was not the rogue adventurer traditionally portrayed. He had a clear vision of what a modern Orthodox Catholic church should look like, along with a strong personal commitment to the missionary effort necessary to try to realise it, an effort which sometimes meant Vilatte experimented and took what he believed to be worthwhile risks.

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used the term in a way that is closely aligned with Vilatte's post-1885 use: Eugène Michaud, *De La Falsification Des Catéchismes Français Et Des Manuels De Théologie Par Le Parti Romaniste De 1670 A 1868* (Paris: Sandoz Et Fischbacher, 1872), pp. 1, 9-11. When Vilatte uses *romanist* he does not mean to refer to all Roman Catholics as would be the case if he were following Protestant usage, nor does his use appear to be an exclusive reference to an ultramontane, as in 189X when he applied it to Grafton's circle of American Anglo-Catholics. *Romanism*, in Vilatte's thinking, appears to denote a trend which began before the Great Schism of 1054, and culminated with the decisions of Vatican I, encompassing all the doctrinal innovations particular to the Roman Church which he argued separated it from the rest of the orthodox Catholic world and formed what Vilatte called 'Neo-Catholicism' as opposed to orthodox or Old Catholicism: 'One Of The Reasons Why We Are Old Roman Catholics', *The Old Catholic*, January 1910, p. 4.

## 2: The Making of A Catholic Reformer (1880-1885)

In January, 1888, Vilatte was in Boston and gave a lecture about his Old Catholic mission. A reporter from the *Boston Herald* attended and described the young priest. 'To see the man himself is to feel assured of the strength of character and the intellectual ability, and the high spiritual purpose which are needed to carry on a work of large religious responsibility.'<sup>1</sup> As part of his lecture Vilatte recounted his journey from Roman Catholic seminarian to Old Catholic missionary and campaigner for Catholic reform.<sup>2</sup> At the time of his ordination in 1885 in Berne, Switzerland, Vilatte was only 28, and had spent five years struggling with, and finally discovering, his own religious identity, a journey that also trained him to be a missionary, preacher, and pastor. Nearly two metres tall, with a broad chest, and

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<sup>1</sup> Glen D. Johnson, 'Joseph René Vilatte: Accidental Catalyst to Ecumenical Dialog', *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 71 (March 2002), 42-60 (p. 49).

<sup>2</sup> 'The Churches', *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 28 Jan 1888, p. 12. The report in the *Boston Herald* (above), was the source of this article.

coarse skin, Vilatte was robust.<sup>3</sup> The French novelist Huysmans described him as a ‘mastodon’ when he met him at St. Martin’s Abbey in Ligugé in the winter of 1899.<sup>4</sup> His massive physical presence was softened by his ‘pleasing countenance suggestive of unusual energy and vitality with an expression of calm dignity.’<sup>5</sup> Vilatte impressed observers as having both the physical and mental stamina to undertake the cause of establishing Catholic reform on the open mission field of North America, an essential quality for a lone missionary in the late nineteenth century Western United States. This chapter traces Vilatte’s journey from Roman Catholicism to the beginning of his journey as a Catholic reformer in 1885.

This journey was shaped by Vilatte’s positive relationships with three very different clergymen: the French-Canadian former Roman Catholic priest and Presbyterian preacher, Charles Chiniquy; the French former Roman Catholic priest and Catholic reform campaigner Hyacinthe Loyson; and the Episcopalian Bishop of Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin John Henry Hobart Brown. Chiniquy’s role in Vilatte’s path to becoming a Catholic reformer was that of catalyst, first in Montreal, in 1880 where Chiniquy’s arguments struck a discordant note in Vilatte’s thinking, and again in 1883 when Chiniquy advised Vilatte to minister to a religiously mixed community, and to contact Hyacinthe Loyson. Loyson saw in Vilatte a like-minded spirit and collaborator opening another front in the cause for religious reform. The two men

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Daniélou, ‘La Première Messe schismatique à Paris’, *L’Écho De Paris*, 4 Feb 1907, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Appolis, ‘En marge de la Séparation’, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Pere René Vilatte’, *The Independent*, 5 August 1887, p. 5.

would always be on the edges of, and even outside, the coalescing Union of Utrecht. Loyson confirmed for Vilatte that it was possible to be an authentic, orthodox Catholic and not be subject to the Roman Catholic Church. He was responsible for Vilatte's ordination in Berne, Switzerland, as well as for connecting Vilatte to the Episcopal Church, and Bishop J. H. Brown of Fond du Lac. Brown was part of a group of Anglo-Catholics who shared Loyson's enthusiasm for cooperation between different national Catholic churches.<sup>6</sup> Like Vilatte, Brown understood the religious challenges immigrants faced in the Western United States, and the importance of establishing Catholic missions independent of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Their roles in the development of Vilatte's early career serve as convenient anchor points for this chapter, as it was their influence and support which set Vilatte on the path of Catholic reform. Without these relationships, it seems unlikely that Vilatte's religious journey would have led him to become a founding father of modern Independent Catholicism.

### **Vilatte Discovers His Vocation**

Vilatte learned the ideals of Gallicanism at an early age. His father's family belonged to la Petite Eglise, founded as a continuation of Gallicanism after the Concordat of 1801 between Pope Pius VII and Napoleon. Gallicanism defended the

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<sup>6</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 94.

autonomy of national churches, and subordinated papal authority to that of ecumenical councils - thus their opposition to the declaration of papal infallibility and the universal jurisdiction of the Pope. Vilatte was born in Paris on 24 January 1854; his parents died while he was young.<sup>7</sup> Vilatte had a sister, three years younger than him, who, after his parents died, was sent to live with his mother's family. She would later join a Roman Catholic convent of teaching nuns in Montrouge.<sup>8</sup> Vilatte, on the other hand, was raised by his paternal grandmother.<sup>9</sup> Parisot reports that she instilled in the young Vilatte the Gallican religious principles which he would later use to question the orthodoxy of ultramontanism while studying at St. Laurent's seminary in Montreal, Canada between 1878 and 1880.<sup>10</sup>

Vilatte, when he was only seventeen, survived the Prussian siege of Paris (1870-1871) and after that, the Paris Commune (1871). He enlisted in the Garde

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<sup>7</sup> Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 8; Ernest C. Margrander, 'Vilatte, Joseph René (Archbishop Mar Timotheus)', *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia Of Religious Knowledge*, ed. by Samuel Macauley Jackson, 12 vols (New York: Funk And Wagnalls, 1912) XII, 187-189 (p. 187); 'Made An Archbishop In Colombo, Ceylon', *The Independent Catholic*, September 1892, p. 3. Both Parisot and Margrander personally knew Vilatte, and Parisot at least spoke French (Vilatte's command of English was not perfect). Some sources give 1855 as Vilatte's birth year: Appolis, 'Une Petite Secte D'Aujourd'hui', p. 575; AT Collection, Letters, Register of Vilatte's Death, Versailles, 2 July 1929.

<sup>8</sup> Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 8. She is never named, nor do we currently have any information on what Vilatte's adult relationship with her might have been like.

<sup>9</sup> Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 8; *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 3.

National to aid the defence of the city against the Prussians.<sup>11</sup> During the Commune that followed, Paris was a divided city. Vilatte later recalled how the city's inhabitants experienced deprivation, fear, and suspicion.<sup>12</sup> Vilatte witnessed how political dogma and anti-clericalism divided people, and caused strife and distress. He later wrote that it was his experience of the Commune which made him decide to emigrate to Canada, which he eventually did in 1874. 'When the siege was succeeded by the Commune, bringing with it great suffering and want, I determined to leave my native land and sail for Canada, as numerous placards had been posted in the rural districts asking for settlers.'<sup>13</sup> This may be the only instance where Vilatte expressed, in writing, the impact that his 'memories of the horrors of the Franco-Prussian War' had upon him.<sup>14</sup> However, his anti-sectarian rhetoric, his opposition to authoritarianism, and his involvement in the pre-World War I peace movement suggest that, at least in the background, the Prussian siege and the Paris Commune contributed to the future shape of his ecclesial vision.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 3. Material confirming Vilatte's movements between his birth in Paris in January 1885 and his settling in Green Bay Wisconsin in March 1884 is sparse. However, what we do have roughly confirms Vilatte's own account given in *My Relations* (pp. 3-5). He first arrived in Canada in the late summer of 1874: Ancestry, *Vilatte Emergency Passport Application*, London, 13 July 1898. In 1878 he settled in the United States: 'Made An Archbishop In Colombo, Ceylon', *The Independent Catholic*, September 1892, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> 'All Creeds to Be at Monster Peace Meet', *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 September 1914, p. 9.

Weeks after his arrival in Canada in 1874, Vilatte, now aged twenty, was employed by a French mission priest at a school near Ottawa. For the next two years he was the teacher, catechist and, as the priest was available only once a month, lay worship leader for the settlement.<sup>16</sup> Vilatte worked at the school for two years. He seems to have not only enjoyed teaching, but envisioned a future for himself as a teacher. His role as catechist and worship leader probably meant that Vilatte also undertook other pastoral roles within the community. Thus, early in his career, Vilatte learned how to be a community leader. The priest in charge, whom Vilatte does not name, 'was so pleased with the result of my work that he began to instruct me in Latin.'<sup>17</sup> This suggests that the priest took steps to encourage Vilatte to consider ordained ministry.

Around 1876 Vilatte wanted to go back to France, and had also been called to serve in the army. It appears, based on his own comment, that Vilatte had become both suspicious of authority, and was haunted by his experiences of armed conflict. 'I was informed that seven years service in the army would be required of me. But the spirit of liberty which I imbibed in America, together with the memories of the horrors of the Franco-Prussian War, made me determined to leave my native land rather than re-enter the army.'<sup>18</sup> Vilatte went to Belgium, and entered the Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 3. Thériault draws an extended parallel between Vilatte and Fr. Louis Reboul, who he says ran the mission school, worked closely with, and influenced Vilatte. Unfortunately, Thériault provides no evidence connecting the two men: Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, pp. 45-51.

<sup>17</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 3-4.

Brothers teaching order at Namur. While there Vilatte concluded that he wished to be a priest, and began to take steps towards that aim, such as to learn Latin.<sup>19</sup> He stayed in Namur for about two years and returned to Canada to continue his education around 1878, entering the Seminary of St. Laurent on the advice of Archbishop Fabre of Montreal.<sup>20</sup>

During his two years at the seminary, his instructors thought well of him. Elias Vanier, a faculty member at the seminary reported to Marx in 1937 that Vilatte 'wrote French well and possessed good judgement', and was 'sufficiently pious...very respectful and accomplished his tasks with regularity'; but, he observed, Vilatte was no academic.<sup>21</sup> In the wake of his consecration in 1892, a number of unflattering tales circulated suggesting that Vilatte had neither the intellect nor the character for the ordained ministry, contradicting published reports about his Protestant mission work in the early 1880s.<sup>22</sup> One account, that of Dr. Crevier, published in 1893, suggests an alternative interpretation. Crevier was a veterinary student at St. Laurent at the time, and claims to have known Vilatte because he was 'pretty badly

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<sup>19</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4; AT Collection, Letters, 'Report on Vilatte made by Rev. Elias Vanier, C.S.C. Of the faculty of the College of St. Laurent, Canada', 1937.

<sup>21</sup> AT Collection, Letters, 'Report on Vilatte made by Rev. Elias Vanier, C.S.C. Of the faculty of the College of St. Laurent, Canada', 1937

<sup>22</sup> See for example, 'He Knew Vilatte', *The Evening News*, 27 December 1893, p. 1; 'René Vilatte Is Discussed', *The Atlanta Constitution*, 21 January 1907, p. 2; AT Collection, Letters, Rev. M.J.P. Dempsey to Rev. M. T. McGarvey, 29 December 1893.



smitten' with the sister of one of Crevier's friends.<sup>23</sup> Crevier commented that Vilatte, who was at the time studying at McGill, 'couldn't somehow get the theological problems through his head.'<sup>24</sup> Rather than, as Crevier intended, suggesting that Vilatte was somehow intellectually incapable, it is more probable to see his desire to seek alternative opinions as a reflection of Vilatte's inner theological struggle which began while he was a student at St. Laurent.

### **Chiniquy Sets Vilatte on the Path to Protestantism**

In June of 1880 Charles Chiniquy was in Montreal attending the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church.<sup>25</sup> Chiniquy had left the Roman Catholic Church in 1858 and initially started an Independent Catholic congregation in Illinois.<sup>26</sup> Financial difficulties, caused in no small part by crop failures in 1858 and 1859, led Chiniquy and his congregation to embrace Presbyterianism in 1860.<sup>27</sup> Chiniquy was a charismatic preacher who before his excommunication and departure from the Roman Catholic Church was known not only for his temperance

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<sup>23</sup> 'He Knew Vilatte', *The Evening News*, 27 December 1893, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> 'He Knew Vilatte', *The Evening News*, 27 December 1893, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> 'Special Dispatch to The Chicago Tribune', *Chicago Tribune*, 19 June 1880, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Brettell, 'From Catholics to Presbyterians', p. 290; Edward R. Kantowicz, 'A Fragment of French Canada on the Illinois Prairies', *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 75 (Winter 1982), 263-276 (p. 265); 'An Independent Catholic Organization', *Detroit Free Press*, 19 September 1858, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Brettell, 'From Catholics to Presbyterians', pp. 290, 292.

campaigns, but also for his vocal criticism of Protestantism.<sup>28</sup> From the mid-1850s, Chiniquy deployed his oratorical skill to criticise the Roman Catholic Church. He not only drew large crowds, but on more than one occasion, Chiniquy was stoned, shot at, or run out of town.<sup>29</sup> Roman Catholics in Montreal who read transcripts or excerpts of his speeches were threatened with excommunication.<sup>30</sup>

Criticising the errors of Rome was a constant theme of Chiniquy's lectures. When Vilatte first encountered him, Chiniquy had only recently returned from a two year lecture tour of Australia and New Zealand, where his theme, on one occasion, was 'Why I left the Church of Rome.'<sup>31</sup> In 1886 Chiniquy published an autobiography, *Fifty Years In The Church of Rome*,<sup>32</sup> followed by its companion, *Forty Years In The Church of Christ*, which he began in 1899, but was published the year after he died. Chiniquy described the purpose of the second volume in the Introduction.

I endeavour to give in the book, as a whole, facts which suggest and teach

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<sup>28</sup> Brettell, 'From Catholics to Presbyterians', p. 286.

<sup>29</sup> 'Mob Violence in Quebec', *Cleveland Daily Leader*, 24 Feb 1859, p. 2; *Raftsmen's Journal*, 9 March 1864, p. 2; *The Burlington Free Press*, 24 July 1871, p. 3; *The Burlington Free Press*, 26 July 1873, p. 2; *Boston Post*, 25 February 1875, p. 2; 'A Fanatic Mob', *The Salt Lake Herald*, 7 Nov 1884, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> 'Opinions Of The Press', *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 19 June 1875, p. 1; 'A Newspaper Proscribed', *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 March 1875, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> 'Ex-priest Chiniquy, From Canada', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 October 1878, p. 1; 'A Former French Catholic Priest', *The New York Times*, 19 January 1882, p. 2; *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, 17 April 1880, p.3.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Chiniquy, *Fifty Years In The Church of Rome*, 10th edition (Toronto: Toronto Willard Tract Depository, 1887).

lessons, and stir up greater activity on the part of Protestants to resist the aggressions of Romanism, and to spread the truth among the benighted dupes and slaves of the Pope. In an important sense, I have written this book because I could not help it.<sup>33</sup>

In his lectures, and in print, Chiniquy described his struggle with Roman Catholic doctrine, the primacy of Peter, and through him the universal jurisdiction of the papacy, as well as his objection to transubstantiation and eucharistic devotions.<sup>34</sup> Chiniquy argued that the Roman Catholic church was a significant threat to intellectual freedom, and to the liberal republican values of North America. He delivered a lecture in Massachusetts in February, 1878, in which he argued: 'What are the principles of the church of Rome? She is the deadly enemy of liberty of conscience and of the Bible, and the sworn enemy of your liberty.'<sup>35</sup> Priests, when they were ordained, promised to read Scripture, and to interpret them in accordance with the 'unanimous consent of the Holy Fathers', but, he argued, the Fathers 'have been unanimous, almost in only one thing, which was to differ on almost every text of the Scriptures on which they have written.'<sup>36</sup> Thus, 'the Church of Rome forced [priests] to make another [promise], which came from hell, and that was to the effect

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Chiniquy, *Forty Years In The Church Of Christ* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1900), p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Chiniquy, *Letter From Rev. C. Chiniquy, to the Bishop of Montreal* (Toronto: Orange Sentinel Print, 1877).

<sup>35</sup> 'Father Chiniquy's Lecture', *The Fitchburg Sentinel*, 7 February 1878, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Chiniquy, *To the Bishop of Montreal*, p. 11.

that he would not interpret a single word of that book according to his intelligence, his conscience, or his mind'.<sup>37</sup> The church demanded that the people look not to Scripture for truth, but to the Church.

Vilatte, who was by this time struggling with ultramontane doctrines as taught at St. Laurent, admitted that he knew before attending Chiniquy's lectures in 1880 that they would be controversial, but it appears that even so he was not prepared for their impact upon him. 'During my second vacation, I learned that a famous French priest, Father Chiniquy, who was devoting his life to preaching against Roman error, announced in Montreal a series of sermons against Roman error. I attended with great fear several of them and returned to the seminary with my mind much disturbed.'<sup>38</sup>

Attending Chiniquy's lecture series compounded Vilatte's doubts, and possibly introduced others. Chiniquy's themes were the Roman Church's aberrant doctrine and abuse of authority. They contributed to his decision to leave the Roman Catholic seminary in 1880, and Vilatte later cited these as reasons why he became an Old Catholic missionary in 1885. 'The teaching of the seminary was so rabidly Romanistic that all other beliefs were condemned as heresies, which brought eternal damnation to all who accepted them.'<sup>39</sup> The Church of Rome could not justifiably

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<sup>37</sup> 'Ex-Priest Chiniquy, from Canada', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1878, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

claim to be universal, due to its arbitrary imposition of new doctrine, and separation from the rest of the Catholic world.<sup>40</sup> The conflicting assertions of orthodoxy between the Roman Catholic and Protestant teaching on the same points, such as the historic episcopate, appear to have vexed Vilatte such that he decided to step away from progressing towards the Roman priesthood in 1880 and explore other options in search of clarity. Although unflattering, Dr. Crevier's statement that when he knew Vilatte as a student he struggled with problems of theology appears to accurately reflect Vilatte's mindset at the time. Vilatte did not meet Chiniquy in person at his June 1880 lecture series to discuss his issues but he did seek the advice of another French Protestant minister in Montreal. He urged Vilatte to join a private class which he taught so that Vilatte might continue his study of theology.<sup>41</sup> Through this unnamed minister Vilatte met a professor at McGill University, who took an interest in him, and in turn introduced Vilatte to the university's president, who persuaded Vilatte to continue his formal theological studies at McGill.<sup>42</sup> Vilatte studied at McGill for two years between 1881 and 1883.<sup>43</sup> Leaving the Roman

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<sup>40</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10; 'Catholicism and Romanism', *The Old Catholic*, March 1895, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4. On private instruction for future ministers and missionaries see: Amy DeRogatis, 'Models of Piety: Plan of Union Missionaries on the Western Reserve, 1800-1806', *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-), 79 (Winter 2001), 257-275 (p. 260).

<sup>42</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4, *The acts and proceedings of the Eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Presbyterian Printing House, 1882), p. cvii. Anson, refers to Vilatte's account, but adds, 'McGill has no record of Vilatte as a student': Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 92-93. Dr. Crevier's interview with *The Evening*

Catholic seminary to continue his theological studies at a Presbyterian university did not resolve Vilatte's struggle, but it did inaugurate a four-year journey during which time he came to clarify his own position, and to develop his skill as a missionary and campaigner.

Vilatte explains why he left Roman Catholicism, but he does not, in the sources currently available, elucidate his positive reasons for becoming Protestant. Indeed, Vilatte never states 'I became a Protestant' at a particular time or moment, unlike when he attributes his moment of conversion to Old Catholicism to his correspondence with Loyson in 1884. We know when he became a Protestant only because he left St. Laurent seminary and joined a Protestant study group after attending Chiniquy's lectures in the summer of 1880. Later that year, before taking up his studies at McGill in 1881, Vilatte served as a Protestant missionary in Fall River, Massachusetts. It is clear that Chiniquy's rhetoric persuaded Vilatte to leave the Roman Catholic seminary, but was Chiniquy, who would later encourage him to correspond with Loyson, responsible for converting Vilatte to Protestantism, or was it his interactions with Protestant ministers in Montreal after Chiniquy had left that caused him to do so? Whoever, and whatever the cause, we do know two things: first that Vilatte later admitted that his conversion to Protestantism was premature, or impulsive, and second that at this stage Vilatte was looking for something. It

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*News*, in 1893 provides an independent verification of Vilatte's time at McGill: 'He Knew Vilatte', *The Evening News*, 27 December 1893, p. 1.

appears, based on his correspondence both with Bishop Brown of Fond du Lac, and with Loyson in Paris in 1884 and 1885, that Vilatte sought 'primitive Christianity', or an expression of orthodox doctrine and practice unencumbered by factionalism.

Between academic years, Vilatte worked as a missionary for the French Work, first in Fall River, Massachusetts, then in New York.<sup>44</sup> The French Work was an interdenominational project based out of McGill which sought to convert French-speaking immigrants to Protestantism.<sup>45</sup> Vilatte organised the mission to Fall River, serving the French Canadians working in the weaving mills there. The French Protestant paper, *L'Aurore*, which was published in Montreal, reported that Vilatte 'demonstrated a courage, an energy and a piety worthy of praise. He has laboured in the midst of many difficulties and privations.'<sup>46</sup> The report also mentions that this was despite his having no oversight from a denominational missionary body.<sup>47</sup> Nineteenth-century missionaries were funded by, and answered to, denominational missionary boards or committees.<sup>48</sup> The relationship between missionary and

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<sup>44</sup> Carr, Mrs. William, Mrs. Eli Thurston, and Mrs. Charles J. Holmes, *History Annals And Sketches of The Central Church of Fall River, Massachusetts A.D. 1842 — A.D. 1905*, ed. by Henry H. Earl (1905), p. 195; Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>45</sup> Vilatte mentions the project in his letter to Brown on 15 December 1884. It appears that 'The French Work' was an informal designation. For mention of an earlier interdenominational Protestant missionary project, see: DeRogatis, 'Models of Piety', p. 258.

<sup>46</sup> *L'Aurore*, 3 August 1882, quoted in Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> *L'Aurore*, 10 August 1882, quoted in Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, p. 62.

<sup>48</sup> A relevant example for Vilatte's story is Bishop Brown's testy relationship with the Episcopal Church's Board of Missions, discussed below.

mission board could be difficult in part because a mission board often had unrealistic expectations for the missionary endeavour, and what might be achieved by one, under-resourced individual.<sup>49</sup> Missionary boards were not only sectarian in religion, pushing to make denominational gains against other protestant bodies, but could be internally fractious. Although Vilatte dealt directly with the French Work, which aimed to be non-sectarian, and indeed to bring Protestants to closer unity, it is likely that he was not entirely immune to the challenges of dealing with denominational mission boards.<sup>50</sup> While he served as a Protestant missionary he demonstrated once more that he could be an effective community organiser.

Between 1880 and 1883 Vilatte continued to study at McGill and work as a Protestant missionary. During this period, however, Vilatte came to understand that Protestantism was not what he sought as a religious identity. '[W]hile on the one hand Romanism has added much error and corruption to the primitive faith, Protestantism had not only taken away the roman errors, but also a part of the primitive deposit of faith.'<sup>51</sup> Vilatte appears to have struggled with the absolutist claims of both traditions to represent the authentic doctrinal and ecclesiological positions of primitive Christianity. Hoping to settle his religious struggle, Vilatte

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<sup>49</sup> Richard D. Leonard, 'Presbyterian and Congregational Missionaries in Early Wisconsin', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 24 (March 1941), 263-282; DeRogatis, 'Models of Piety'.

<sup>50</sup> He alludes to it in his letter to Brown of 15 Dec 1884.

<sup>51</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.



decided at some point in mid-1883 to once more engage with Roman Catholicism. He entered the noviciate of another teaching order, the Clerics of St. Viator at Bourbonnais, Illinois.<sup>52</sup> While there, Vilatte learned that Chiniquy lived nearby, and went to visit him. At their meeting, probably sometime between the last three months of 1883 and January 1884, Vilatte explained his situation to the man whose lecture series three years earlier had been the catalyst for his current predicament. Chiniquy invited Vilatte to stay with him, which he did. Vilatte later wrote how on this occasion Chiniquy's advice altered his future direction.

After several months of friendship, he advised me not to return to the monastery, but to go to Green Bay, Wisconsin, and begin work as a missionary among the French people, who, who although both Protestants and Roman Catholic, were drifting into spiritualism and infidelity. Father Chiniquy also suggested my writing to the famous Father Hyacinthe of Paris, who, as a reformer and fellow Gallican would both sympathise and direct my steps.<sup>53</sup>

Chiniquy appears to have appreciated Vilatte's talent as a missionary, thus he arranged for Vilatte to go to Green Bay, Wisconsin and work among the French speaking community there. It is clear that he also wanted to engage Vilatte in missionary work while he arrived at a final resolution to his religious quandary. In so doing, Chiniquy hoped to not only prevent Vilatte returning to Roman

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<sup>52</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

Catholicism, but to also prevent him from becoming dispirited and drifting into indifference or worse, joining the many immigrants who had already done so. Chiniquy, through his interactions with Vilatte during this period, probably recognised that Vilatte, unlike himself, was not someone who would be content to remain a Protestant. If true, then this was also probably the reason that he advised Vilatte to contact Hyacinthe Loyson, who, unlike Chiniquy, remained an Independent Catholic and Catholic reformer. Once more Chiniquy played a pivotal role in Vilatte's religious life.

Vilatte arrived in Green Bay, Wisconsin, in March of 1884 to take up mission work there under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church.<sup>54</sup> Vilatte used his own personal spiritual struggle to forge a working community out of various sects and opinions. 'I began by visiting the various families and urging them to unite and form one congregation and ignore for the present all differences of doctrine. I felt that as long as my own mind was not at rest, I could preach nothing but the simple Gospel.'<sup>55</sup> Vilatte's approach met with success. He conducted two services each Sunday. The congregation outgrew their chapel, 'which was enlarged only to be filled again.'<sup>56</sup> The Presbyterians recognised his talent as a preacher and community builder. The Winnebago presbytery granted Vilatte a preaching license to serve at Calvary

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<sup>54</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>56</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

Presbyterian Church at its meeting on 8 April 1884.<sup>57</sup> Citing his intelligence, ability, and ‘magnetic power of speaking’, albeit in French, the presbytery ordained Vilatte four months later on 15 July.<sup>58</sup> Though he had yet to find his own peace, navigating conflicting religious views with the inhabitants of his new mission field showed Vilatte to be an able preacher and pastor.

### **Loyson’s Advice Sets Vilatte on the Path of Catholic Reform**

Charles Jean Marie Loyson, known by his religious name Père Hyacinthe, was, like Chiniquy, a former Roman Catholic priest. Whereas the French-Canadian Chiniquy abandoned Independent Catholicism for pragmatic reasons, Loyson remained, and worked as an Independent Catholic, championing the cause of Catholic reform in France.<sup>59</sup> Between 1883 and 1884, Loyson, who lived and worked in Paris, toured the United States giving lectures about Catholic reform and raising

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<sup>57</sup> ‘The Winnebago Presbytery’, *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, 9 April 1884, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> ‘The Winnebago Presbytery’, *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, 11 July 1884, p. 4. Anson incorrectly describes Vilatte at this stage as a freelance lay missionary sent to Green Bay by Chiniquy: Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 93, 94. Although Vilatte’s English improved from his first contact with Bishop Brown in 1884 until he returned to France in 1923, French remained his primary working language in preaching, and correspondence.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Rev. Charles Loyson (Pere Hyacinthe) intends no attack on the Pope or Catholic church in his lectures in this country. He calls himself an independent Catholic. He will simply explain his views on religious matters, and defend his position...The proceeds of his lectures will be devoted to the religious work he is engaged in in Paris. His Independent Catholic church has a large congregation in that great city’: *The Burlington Free Press*, 12 November 1883, p. 1.

money for his mission. He described himself as an evangelist for authentic Catholicism, purified of the counterfeit doctrines of ultramontaniam.<sup>60</sup> Loyson argued that there was a difference between Catholic doctrine and Roman doctrine; the former was the orthodox faith, the latter heretical.<sup>61</sup> Though he shared Chiniquy's belief in liberty of conscience, Loyson's approach to criticising Roman Catholicism was, he believed, less aggressive.<sup>62</sup> Loyson opposed sectarianism<sup>63</sup> and believed that Catholic reform could eliminate the 'narrow tenets, ceremonies or forms devised by human agencies',<sup>64</sup> and thus contribute to the cause of Christian reunion. Loyson proposed a more liberal, democratic church, one that cultivated free enquiry, and the full engagement and participation of the laity.<sup>65</sup> Vilatte first wrote to Loyson some time between April and the first half of August 1884.<sup>66</sup> He requested more information about Loyson's own vision for Catholic reform, and sought his advice on how to inaugurate a similar mission in the United States. Thus, it appears that Vilatte already had ideas of his own on how to proceed.

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<sup>60</sup> 'Father Hyacinthe', *Chicago Tribune*, 29 October 1883, p. 2; 'Pere Hyacinthe', *Chicago Tribune*, 31 October 1883, p. 3; 'The Gallic Pere', *National Republican*, 8 November 1883, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> 'Father Hyacinthe', *Chicago Tribune*, 29 October 1883, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> 'Arrival of Pere Hyacinthe', *New-York Tribune*, 29 October 1883, p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Cross, 'Père Hyacinthe Loyson', pp. 103, 111.

<sup>64</sup> 'Pere Hyacinthe', *Public Ledger*, 23 November 1883, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> 'Pere Hyacinthe', *The Town Talk*, 20 February 1884, p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Vilatte states that he wrote to Loyson 'shortly after beginning my work [in Green Bay]'. The Presbyterians licensed him to preach on 12 April, and ordained him on 15 July, which gives us a reasonable time frame: Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

Vilatte's first exchange of letters with Loyson is known only through the summaries that he provided in *My Relations with the Protestant Episcopal Church*.<sup>67</sup> The issues that he highlights in this exchange, and emphasised when he wrote to Bishop Brown in December 1884, are crucial to understanding what made him a committed campaigner for Catholic reform. After introducing himself, and describing his personal religious struggle, Vilatte shared with Loyson his belief that neither Roman Catholicism nor Protestantism met the needs of the French-speaking immigrants in the United States. Because of this, many had already abandoned the church, or had drifted towards Spiritism or atheism.<sup>68</sup>

There were here many hundreds of French and Belgians, a part of whom had already deserted the Church, and the remainder while nominally members, were thoroughly dissatisfied with their Church and that therefore I believed that there was a fruitful field for the organisation of a purified Catholic Church which would present the gospel to the people as did the primitive Church, and exercise authority according to the spirit of free America.<sup>69</sup>

Would Loyson provide Vilatte with more information about his work, and advise him on how to 'establish in America a Catholic Church without any other

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<sup>67</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work in the Diocese of Fond Du Lac, Together With Important Documents And Letters* (Pewaukee: Burleson Bros. Printers, 1887), pp. 6-7.

<sup>69</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

qualification’?<sup>70</sup>

No doubt Loyson saw Vilatte’s letter as a product of his recent tour of the United States. Loyson’s favourable reply, dated 22 September 1884, must have been dispatched shortly after his return from the United States to Paris via London. His letter encouraged Vilatte. ‘Père Hyacinthe wrote that his church held the doctrinal position of the undivided Church before the separation of the East and the West and stated his conviction that if my work were directed by the same principles it would succeed.’<sup>71</sup> Vilatte would later recall that Loyson’s letter ‘brought peace to my mind because I realised clearly now, where the hope for the future was.’<sup>72</sup> His correspondence with Loyson not only enabled Vilatte to reach the resolution to his religious identity he sought, it also provided the support of another experienced campaigner who would guide and counsel him as to the way ahead.

Loyson, who struggled to find suitable candidates for ordained ministry in Paris, must have believed that Vilatte’s experience as a missionary and pastor gave him the skills needed to establish Catholic reform in the United States, and thus continue to cultivate the ground which Loyson prepared during his earlier tour of the country.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Cross, ‘Père Hyacinthe Loyson’, p. 120.

Loyson's wife, Emilie, wrote to Vilatte for him on 14 March 1885.<sup>74</sup> She apologised that it took so long to write; Loyson had been ill, and over-scheduled. Emilie conveyed Loyson's counsel to Vilatte. His plan to establish Catholic reform in the United States was important, and as such demanded careful planning from the start. As part of that planning, Loyson urged Vilatte to come to Paris, to confer with Loyson in person, and then go on to Berne, Switzerland, where his ordination as an Old Catholic priest could be easily arranged.

This is a *sine qua non*, if you hope for any success in a true Catholic reform. If you act with wisdom and charity, as becomes a priest of the Holy Church of Christ, you can do a great work. But if you make a false step at the beginning, you will surely fail, and not only injure your own future vocation, but do great harm to the cause of Catholicism and religious reform.<sup>75</sup>

Vilatte's Old Catholic ordination to the priesthood was an invaluable first step. It would establish Vilatte's credentials as a campaigner for Catholic reform, as well as his authentic Catholic orders.

Loyson's counsel that Vilatte consider his next steps carefully so as to not injure

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<sup>74</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5. Vilatte dates the letter and includes the substantive excerpt. The whole letter (un-dated) is reproduced in: *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 19, and in: Barrette, Guillaume, Edouard Debecker, and Augustin Marchand, *Ecclesiastical Relations Between The Old Catholics of America and Foreign Churches* (Duvall [?], 1893), p. 17.

<sup>75</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 19.

the cause of Catholic reform was doubtless a reflection on his own experience.

Loyson had made a number of mistakes in his independent Catholic career, his first pastorate in Geneva, Switzerland, for example, as well as being criticised by other Old Catholics for his marriage in London in 1872, and his overly close relations with the Anglicans.<sup>76</sup> No doubt when Vilatte initially wrote to Loyson, he described his relationship with Chiniquy. Chiniquy had deployed his considerable oratorical talents against Roman Catholicism since becoming Protestant. In one of his first interviews after landing in New York for his lecture tour in 1883, Loyson commented that Chiniquy's sectarian style of rhetoric was detrimental to the cause of Catholic reform.

I wish to place before the American public my idea of Christianity as a large and comprehensive system, repudiating all narrowness. Yet I cling to the ancient Catholic doctrine, separating the Catholic Church from its later Roman accretions. I believe in the sacraments, the episcopacy and all the ancient doctrine of the Church. There will be nothing aggressive in my lectures. I think that such violent attacks as those of Père Chirigny [*sic*] are imprudent and uncharitable.<sup>77</sup>

Knowing therefore, of Vilatte's connection with Chiniquy it is likely that part of his motivation for his warning to Vilatte was Loyson's wish to steer him away from

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<sup>76</sup> Cross, 'Père Hyacinthe Loyson', p. 96.

<sup>77</sup> 'Arrival of Pere Hyacinthe', *New-York Tribune*, 29 October 1883, p. 5.



Chiniquy's influence and style, as well as to give him advice on how best to avoid making the very mistakes Loyson himself had already made.

If Vilatte could not manage to go to Paris, Loyson advised him to 'take advice from the Bishop of the American Episcopal Church of your diocese who is a good and wise man.'<sup>78</sup> Loyson's independent Catholic mission in Paris had operated under the episcopal protection of the Anglicans since 1878.<sup>79</sup> That same year the Lambeth Conference proposed that the Anglican Church provide all reasonable assistance to those Catholics who, because of their refusal to accept the doctrinal innovations of the Church of Rome, sought to maintain their Catholic faith free of the 'yoke of error and superstition'.<sup>80</sup> Loyson advised Vilatte to take advantage of the Lambeth decision in the cause of establishing Catholic reform in the United States. Loyson, who was ordained in the Roman Catholic Church on 14 June 1851, joined the Catholic reform cause already in Catholic orders. Vilatte, a Presbyterian minister, would need to undergo Catholic ordination. Based on Loyson's emphasis in his communication of 14 March 1885, we can safely assume that Loyson was not advising Vilatte to accept ordination from the Episcopalians, only their advice, and support.

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<sup>78</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 19.

<sup>79</sup> Cross, 'Père Hyacinthe Loyson', pp. 182-185.

<sup>80</sup> *The Lambeth Conferences of 1867, 1878, and 1888. With the Official Reports and Resolutions, together with the Sermons preached at the Conferences*, ed. by Randall T. Davidson (London: S.P.C.K., 1889), p. 340.

Loyson enjoyed close working relationships with a particular group of high churchmen; those involved with the Anglo-Continental Society in Europe, and Bishop Arthur Cleveland Coxe of New York in the United States.<sup>81</sup> Coxe would later be a supporter and correspondent of Vilatte after his break with Charles Grafton in 1892. Loyson's simultaneous affiliation with the Anglicans and the Swiss Old Catholics caused some confusion during his American tour of 1883-1884. Some papers labelled him a Protestant, others speculated that he was about to convert to Anglicanism.<sup>82</sup> Though he received episcopal oversight from the Anglican Bishop Henry Lascelles Jenner in England, Loyson was clear about his identity; he was not a Protestant, nor an Anglican but a Catholic.<sup>83</sup> He believed that neither the Roman Catholics, nor the Protestants were orthodox. 'As to my position, it is by no means so vague as my opponents make out. I am still a Catholic, for though I associate much with Anglicans, it is only because they are nearest to my ideal of a reformed Catholic Church. I never had any intention of joining them.'<sup>84</sup> Loyson understood that as

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<sup>81</sup> Cross, 'Père Hyacinthe Loyson'.

<sup>82</sup> 'Pere Hyacinthe's Arrival. The French Protestant's Reception — Sharp Contrast With His Former Welcome — Plans For His Stay in America', *Burlington Weekly Press*, 2 November 1883, p. 3; 'Pere Hyacinthe', *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 December 1883, p. 13; 'Arrival of Pere Hyacinthe', *New-York Tribune*, 29 October 1883, p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> Bishop Jenner was originally consecrated in 1866 for the newly created Anglican diocese of Dunedin in New Zealand. He was unable to take control of his see in part because of his Anglo-Catholicism. Jenner returned England to serve as the vicar of St. Mildred's parish in Kent: Cross, 'Père Hyacinthe Loyson', pp. 243,248. On Loyson's understanding of his Catholic identity: Cross, 'Père Hyacinthe Loyson', p. 139.

<sup>84</sup> 'Arrival of Pere Hyacinthe', *New-York Tribune*, 29 October 1883, p. 5.

there were no Old Catholic bishops in the United States, Vilatte would need to have a similar arrangement with the Episcopalians as he himself had with the Church of England. Loyson wrote to Vilatte on 6 May 1885 that he had important matters to discuss with him about Catholic reform in America. It may be that he wanted to be sure that Vilatte was equally clear that while they cooperated with, and received assistance from the Anglicans, there was a distinct difference between his Anglican supporters and his Independent Catholic identity. Francophone immigrants, as Bishop Brown pointed out in a letter to *The Church Eclectic* on 17 July 1885, did not believe that Anglicans possessed valid orders, nor would they easily accept the theology and ritual of the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>85</sup> Loyson's advice to Vilatte that he be ordained in Berne by an Old Catholic bishop and then organise his mission as an Old Catholic priest would solve that problem, and, so all three men believed, remove serious barriers to evangelisation. If Vilatte were to have any success building an Old Catholic mission in the United States he would have to have unquestioned orders, and be able to clearly assert his distinctive identity from Anglicanism. Later, it was in part Vilatte's steadfast defence of his Old Catholic identity that caused Bishop Charles Grafton, Brown's successor, to turn on him.

Loyson and his Anglican colleagues were committed to an agenda for Catholic reform: National Catholicism, primitive Christianity and the historic episcopate, and

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<sup>85</sup> Brown to *The Church Eclectic*, 17 July 1885 in *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 18.

Christian reunion. The Lambeth statement of 1878 was an important milestone in Loyson's relationship with Anglicans. Indeed, his involvement with prominent Old Catholics, such as Herzog, and Anglicans such as Archbishop Tait immediately before 1878 played a role in shaping the tone of the bishops' statement.<sup>86</sup> Loyson clarified the nature of their cooperation to a reporter in Washington on 7 November 1883, less than a year before Vilatte first corresponded with him.

For the first time since the separation over three centuries ago, intercommunion is established between the Anglican and the Latin branches of the church. The initiative was taken in 1878, on the occasion of the resolutions promulgated on the part of the Pan-Anglican council at Lambeth palace to give aid to all persons and bodies seeking to rid themselves from the domination of Rome for the maintenance of the Christian faith.<sup>87</sup>

Loyson believed that he was the vanguard of Old Catholic and Anglican cooperation and intercommunion. 'My example was followed by Bishop Herzog, of Berne, and then by Bishop Reinkens of Bonn.'<sup>88</sup> He understood that Catholic reform was a missionary endeavour, one that he believed was slowly building momentum within Western Catholicism. The United States was an open mission field, unencumbered by centuries-old Roman Catholic institutions and customs. During his tour of the

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<sup>86</sup> Cross, 'Père Hyacinthe Loyson', p. 168.

<sup>87</sup> 'The Gallic Pere', *National Republican*, 8 Nov 1883, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> 'The Gallic Pere', *National Republican*, 8 Nov 1883, p. 5.

United States between 28 October 1883 and 11 June 1884 Loyson believed that he witnessed enough sympathy for his cause that he considered relocating from Paris to America.<sup>89</sup> No doubt Loyson interpreted Vilatte's desire to establish Catholic reform there as an unmissable opportunity.

### **Brown and Vilatte Create an Uniate Old Catholic Mission**

We do not have the text of Loyson's letter to Vilatte of 22 September 1884. However, based on his letter of 14 March 1885, it appears that Loyson had encouraged Vilatte, in that first letter, to contact the Episcopalians, possibly Alfred Lee, the Presiding Bishop at that time.<sup>90</sup> Vilatte wrote to Lee and received a reply on 12 December 1884 advising him to contact Brown, the bishop of the Episcopal diocese in which Vilatte lived.<sup>91</sup> Vilatte in turn wrote to Brown on 15 December 1884. Loyson's 14 March 1885 letter to Vilatte suggests that Vilatte also wrote to Loyson telling him of Lee's response and asking for his opinion. The Loysons had been in Wisconsin in May 1884, and may have had occasion to meet Episcopalians who knew Brown, and could therefore form an opinion.

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<sup>89</sup> Cross, 'Père Hyacinthe Loyson', p. 251. Loyson arrived in New York from Liverpool: 'Pere Hyacinthe's Arrival. The French Protestant's Reception — Sharp Contrast With His Former Welcome — Plans For His Stay in America', *Burlington Weekly Press*, 2 November 1883, p. 3. Loyson departed New York for London: *The New York Times*, 12 June 1884, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Lee, the first Episcopal bishop of Delaware, was elected Presiding Bishop in May 1884 while the Loysons were still in the United States.

<sup>91</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church and Vilatte', p. 36.

Loyson's letter to Vilatte of 22 September 1884 probably included either Loyson's description of his relationship with the Anglicans and its link to the 1878 Lambeth statement, or the suggestion that Vilatte follow his example, and approach the Episcopalians to establish a similar working relationship, appealing to the 1878 statement as a means of opening the door. Vilatte's first letter to Brown, dated 15 December 1884, appears to support this. Vilatte opened this letter telling Brown that he has 'heard of the letters containing reports adopted by the conference of Bishops of the Anglican communion held at Lambeth Palace in 1878', a possible reference to Loyson.<sup>92</sup> Vilatte continued, informing Brown that he had rejected 'the infallible [*sic*] supremacy of the Pope, as well as all other errors which have deformed the Primitif Christianity', but having done so, he became Protestant, and had been a Presbyterian pastor up to this point.<sup>93</sup> Vilatte described how, having learned that his opinions were more in alignment with Loyson's, especially on the need for the historic episcopate, which the Presbyterians rejected, he had realised that Protestant worship was an impediment to converting people to primitive Catholicism from Roman Catholicism. 'In consequence I am in direct disunion with the principles of the Presbyterian Church and the Roman Catholic, therefore I come to ask protection of your church, seeing that in 1878 she offered herself to bring succor [*sic*] to all who sincerely adopted the Catholic reform'.<sup>94</sup> Vilatte's letter is clearly framed as an

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<sup>92</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown, 15 Dec 1884.

<sup>93</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown, 15 Dec 1884.

<sup>94</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown, 15 Dec 1884.

appeal to employing the 1878 Bishops' statement to his proposed project of converting the area's Francophone immigrants to reformed Catholicism under the protection of the Episcopal Church, as had already been done for Loyson in Paris. His rejection of papal error, and the acceptance of the historic episcopate, are two key elements of the Lambeth declaration, allowing for non-Anglicans to receive Anglican assistance. Vilatte's ideas quickly found favour with Brown, who moved to facilitate Vilatte's project to establish the first Old Catholic mission in the United States.

Although Vilatte's account suggests that he used his personal theological struggle to good effect in his missionary work, his letters to Brown in December 1884 and January 1885 show that he did not allow it to interfere with his pastoral responsibility and to become disruptive to the community. Vilatte admits to Brown that since his ordination he had been approached by Francophone immigrants from the surrounding areas asking him to start missions there, but that he 'always refused my concourse for I am of the firm belief that the Presbyterianism cannot satisfy the principles and customs of this people'.<sup>95</sup> He adds in the same letter a note that suggests that his local presbytery was fully aware of Vilatte's position. 'Allow me to remark that the intentions I have submitted to you are all together ignored by the Presbytery and my congregation, they are my own personal convictions and as my

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<sup>95</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown, 15 December 1885.

yearly engagement terminates the first of March, until then I wish my intentions kept secret.<sup>96</sup> Vilatte's request to keep his approach to Brown confidential, appears to emphasise that this was his personal conviction and choice, and that he did not want what he did for himself to negatively impact the congregation he currently served. In an additional note, Vilatte states that he has submitted his resignation, but that as it was very difficult to find French-speaking ministers, he promised the Presbytery to stay on in order to give them an opportunity to fill the vacancy.

Brown was already favourably predisposed towards Vilatte's proposal to establish a francophone mission along European Old Catholic lines. He understood the challenges presented by the multiplicity of languages and national customs in his diocese for establishing and maintaining missions and parishes.<sup>97</sup> Anglophone communities in the diocese intersected with, or were separated from one another by, communities of non-English speaking ethnicities.<sup>98</sup> 'We might well wish today that our clergy could have the gift of tongues, so that they might open the mysteries of truth and grace to the Germans, Bohemians, Poles, Belgians, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, French, Welsh, and to the Indian tribes who live by our side.'<sup>99</sup> Brown knew that a different approach was needed if they were going to successfully evangelise

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<sup>96</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown, 15 December 1885.

<sup>97</sup> *Journal of The Fifth And Sixth Annual Councils of The Protestant Episcopal Church, in The Diocese of Fond Du Lac* (Burlison Brothers, 1880), Appendix B.

<sup>98</sup> *Fifth And Sixth Annual Councils of The Diocese of Fond Du Lac*, p. 46.

<sup>99</sup> *Fifth And Sixth Annual Councils of The Diocese of Fond Du Lac*, p. 46.



the many ethnicities in his territory. He felt frustrated by the Board of Missions' lack of support.<sup>100</sup> He noted that some might expect that this was a proper topic for the General Convention; however, Brown was aware that the mission field was no place to deliberate, and wait for committees to report.<sup>101</sup> Brown did not have enough clergy, neither did he have clergy who could work in the languages needed. Two additional barriers frustrated him: immigrant attitudes towards Anglicanism, and the religious cultures of the various immigrant communities present in Brown's diocese. Vilatte and Loyson's proposal offered a pragmatic solution to a pastoral problem.

Brown was a high churchman and as such was convinced of the fully Catholic character of Anglicanism. Many immigrants, on the other hand, were either dubious of, or could not accept, the validity of Anglican sacraments. Brown believed that if only Anglicans could communicate with these different ethnicities on their own terms (for now) they could, in time, convince them of the authentic Catholicity of the Anglican Communion.

Instead of retreating before the emigrant ...[we should] acquaint him with the pure and authoritative character of the branch of Christ's Holy Church of which we are members. A true Catholic Church, of lineage easily traced, with

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<sup>100</sup> 'Missionary Intelligence', *The Spirit of Missions*, 52 (1887), p. 61.

<sup>101</sup> *Journal of The Eighth Annual Council of The Protestant Episcopal Church in The Diocese of Fond Du Lac* (Fond du Lac: P. B. Haber, Book And Job Printer, 1885), Appendix A.

a ministry of Apostolic authority, with sacraments whole and undefiled, and a liturgy venerable, evangelical, fervent, all embracing, with a people zealous for the honour of God and the welfare of human souls, would have attractions for the thoughtful and energetic men who come from the old world to make a lasting abode with us.<sup>102</sup>

That could take time, and resources, neither of which Brown felt he had in abundance. However, an Independent Catholic priest working under his episcopal direction just might successfully achieve this goal.

Brown's solution was grounded in his ecclesiology, which, like Loyson's, was shaped by the idea that Catholicism is non-sectarian, and that in the interests of Christian unity denominations needed to be less so. Brown laid out his vision at the Diocesan Council in 1882.

A narrow national institution might take no interest in them. But the Holy Catholic Church rises above all differences of nation or class or color. ... It is the rightful spiritual home, not only of Englishmen, but of Scandinavians, Teutons, Celts and Latins. I am aware of the difficulties that have been found in approaching such persons as I have been speaking of. But if this be the Catholic Church of our Lord, we must rise to Catholic measure in dealing

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<sup>102</sup> *Eighth Annual Council of The Diocese of Fond Du Lac, Appendix A.*

with this subject. I can conceive of some such which might embrace the recognition for a while, perhaps permanently, of the liturgies to which these different nationalities have become attached, and of many of their peculiar customs, and of the extension to them of episcopal ministrations and supervision, without endangering in the least our own heritage of truth and grace.<sup>103</sup>

Loyson expressed his own, similarly broad view when he was interviewed in Washington in November 1883.

We do not seek its uniformity [the church's], which is manifestly absurd...I seek a reform within the church, the abolition of its corrupt practices, its superincumbent ordinances and decrees, and a restoration to their proper importance, divested of all extraneous matters, of the cardinal doctrines of the church. These...are the common property of the church, the common belief of all Christians, and would unite all denominations, all creeds, all diversities of Christian organisation upon one central basis....Pure, positive, progressive Christianity opposed to fetichism and negation cannot fail to triumph.<sup>104</sup>

Vilatte's plan to establish a mission aimed at the francophone immigrants, using liturgical forms and calendar familiar to French and Belgian culture, along with the French language, suited Brown, who sought to make the immigrants Catholic, rather

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<sup>103</sup> *Eighth Annual Council of The Diocese of Fond Du Lac*, Appendix A.

<sup>104</sup> 'The Gallic Pere', *National Republican*, 8 Nov 1883, p. 5.

than to allow Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Spiritualist sects to gain ground on the mission field of his diocese. But it also worked well with the belief all three men shared that it would be through a broad, progressive, reformed Catholicism that Christian reunion might be achieved.

Brown was bound by the rules and conventions of his church. It is clear that while support was strong, it was not unanimous. Brown first conducted a background check of Vilatte.<sup>105</sup> Finding no impediments there, he consulted two faculty members of the Episcopal seminary in the diocese, Nashotah House: Dr. Adams, professor of Divinity, and Theodore Riley, professor of Ecclesiastical History. Both supported the idea. Riley wrote to Brown on 14 April 1885 advising him to send Vilatte to Berne 'and be priested at once and then return immediately as a priest to place himself and his people under your jurisdiction as a Uniate Church...preserving its own rites and customs yet in communion with you and under your Episcopal rule'.<sup>106</sup> Brown's Standing Committee, meeting on 14 April, recommended that Vilatte be ordained, and backdated their recommendation to 1 April 1885.<sup>107</sup> Brown

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<sup>105</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church and Vilatte', p. 37.

<sup>106</sup> Riley to Brown 14 April 1885 - in Hogue, 'Episcopal Church and Vilatte', p. 38. 'Uniate' though a controversial term, is both original to Vilatte, Brown and his colleagues' plan for the Old Catholic mission, as evidenced by Riley's letter, but it best expresses the relationship as they envisioned it at the time, if only temporarily. The Old Catholics would maintain their distinctive identity and their own rites and rules, but be subject to Brown's oversight.

<sup>107</sup> *Eighth Annual Council of The Diocese of Fond Du Lac*, p. 13.

also 'called to his aid the advice of several of our most eminent Bishops...'<sup>108</sup>

including Loyson's friend William Doane bishop of Albany,<sup>109</sup> and John Williams, bishop of Connecticut. Williams' reply was enthusiastic. Writing to Brown on 18 April, 'I never tho't of it before, but it seems a way owned by Providence. ... I would not hesitate a moment. Indeed I believe that this opp't embraced will lead to very great results; the more I think on it, the grander are the possibilities which it opens.'<sup>110</sup> A few days after receiving these confirmations, on 27 April 1885, Brown wrote to Vilatte. 'I have submitted the suggestion of Pere Hyacinthe that you go to Berne for ordination, to the judgement and advice of our bishops and am satisfied that is the wisest course for you and all interested to be pursued.'<sup>111</sup>

Brown was perhaps over-enthusiastic, as the Standing Committee intended for him to ordain Vilatte, rather than as both Brown and Vilatte planned, to send Vilatte to Berne to be ordained there by the Old Catholic Bishop Herzog.<sup>112</sup> This would be the first test of Vilatte's resolve to maintain a clear identity as an Independent Catholic missionary. The committee met again on 5 May and unanimously

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<sup>108</sup> Theodore Riley, 'Memorial Sermon', *Journal of The Fourteenth Annual Council of The Protestant Episcopal Church in The Diocese of Fond Du Lac* (1888), Appendix C, p. 56.

<sup>109</sup> Doane, a noted Anglo-Catholic replied on 22 April, that if Herzog would ordain Vilatte it would be a good thing (Fond du Lac Archive, Index).

<sup>110</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church and Vilatte', pp. 38-9.

<sup>111</sup> Brown to Vilatte, 27 April 1885, in Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 6.

<sup>112</sup> Hogue omits this awkward incident suggesting that the Standing Committee, as well as key figures in the Diocese, and other bishops fully backed Brown and Vilatte's plan: Hogue, 'Episcopal Church and Vilatte', pp. 38-39.

recommended that Bishop Brown ordain Vilatte to the diaconate.<sup>113</sup> The same day Brown wrote to Vilatte and reported to him the conversation at that meeting.

The Standing Committee of the diocese have just met...warranting your ordination to the diaconate immediately and to the Priesthood as soon afterwards as possible. The main reasons controlling the Standing Committee were the conviction that the Anglican succession of Apostolic authority is preferable to that of the Old Catholics, the importance of maintaining the sufficiency of it in this country, the saving of time and expense, and the knitting of a closer unity with the diocese from the beginning of the movement.<sup>114</sup>

These are not unreasonable points. Brown was the first bishop of the diocese, and struggling to mould it into a cohesive community. Introducing the establishment of a uniate church with a separate identity and independent line of apostolic succession, albeit under his control, could complicate or further hinder those efforts. Yet the committee's belief that the Anglican apostolic succession was sufficient, and that that ought to be defended, however well meaning and reasonable, defeated the purpose of the Independent Catholic project: converting the lapsed francophone Roman Catholics in the region to the cause of Catholic reform. Vilatte later recounted that he went to see Brown on 5 May and successfully persuaded him to return to his earlier

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<sup>113</sup> *Eighth Annual Council of The Diocese of Fond Du Lac*, p. 14.

<sup>114</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 7.

position, overriding the decision of the Standing Committee, and that Loyson's plan was the one that would be most successful. He left that meeting with a letter of introduction from Brown to Herzog.<sup>115</sup>

Vilatte left Green Bay supplied with Brown's letter and with testimonials from other key figures in the diocese, including Riley and Adams. Loyson had already secured Herzog's approval to ordain Vilatte, however, Loyson's letter, and Herzog's confirming it, did not arrive in Green Bay until after Vilatte had already departed for Europe.<sup>116</sup> Seeing him off at the train station, Brown said to Vilatte: 'I will ordain you priest tomorrow, if you will be satisfied with your ordination and rest here'.<sup>117</sup> Vilatte knew that if his mission were to be a success he could not accept Brown's offer, and for himself having finally found peace with his own sense of religious identity could not accept. According to his later account, he replied, 'Old Catholic I am, - Old Catholic I will be.'<sup>118</sup> Brown then promised him that his mission would not be answerable to the Standing Committee, which had earlier tried to prevent his going to Berne.<sup>119</sup> Following Loyson's example, Vilatte assiduously protected the

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<sup>115</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 7. There is a typo in the body of Hogue's article which dates the letter to 6 May 1885, however, the correct date is given in the citation: Hogue, 'Episcopal Church and Vilatte', p. 39.

<sup>116</sup> E. Loyson to Vilatte, 6 May 1885; Herzog to Vilatte, 7 May 1885 both cited in: Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 8. Herzog's letter is reproduced in full, and Loyson's letter is reproduced in full and dated in: *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>117</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 8.

<sup>119</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 8.

independent identity of the new mission throughout the planning process. Vilatte was relieved by Brown's promise to him as he departed. His uniate status would later contribute to the rupture between Vilatte and Brown's successor, Grafton. But for now, Vilatte had an important acknowledgment that his mission would be independent from the Episcopal Church. Vilatte travelled first to New York, where he stayed with the clergy of Trinity Church, and finalised details of his journey, until he departed for Europe on 16 May 1885.<sup>120</sup>

Vilatte arrived in Berne on 3 June 1885.<sup>121</sup> He presented himself and his letters and testimonials to Herzog. Herzog brought Vilatte to Charles Hale, a visiting Episcopal clergyman, and asked him to verify Vilatte's documents and give his opinion.<sup>122</sup> Hale personally knew two of the testimonial writers, Riley and Adams, and believed everything to be in order. He advised Herzog that there was no impediment to proceeding as planned. The next day, 4 June, Herzog and three priests examined Vilatte's theological understanding.<sup>123</sup> This was the second time he was examined, and probably the third, if his Presbyterian pastorate is included. They

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<sup>120</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church and Vilatte', p. 39.

<sup>121</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 8.

<sup>122</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 8.

<sup>123</sup> Thériault states that Vilatte studied for his theological exam under Michaud. However, the timeline of events shows that Vilatte had no such opportunity. Also, given how much Vilatte approved of Michaud's thinking, if he had had the opportunity to study under him, Vilatte would surely have mentioned it: Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, p. 71.



judged him fit for ordination. Herzog elevated him to minor orders on the following day, the diaconate on 6 June, and the priesthood on Sunday, 7 June 1885.<sup>124</sup> The following week, on 13 June, Vilatte sailed from the Netherlands to New York, landing on 25 June.<sup>125</sup> Vilatte returned to Green Bay in time to participate in the anniversary events of Nashotah House on 28 and 29 June.<sup>126</sup> He established a temporary mission site in the Sunday school rooms of the Episcopal Church in Green Bay within the first two weeks of July.<sup>127</sup> At the same time he toured the Belgian settlements in the area to choose a permanent mission site.<sup>128</sup>

### **Vilatte: Catholic Reform Missionary in America**

Vilatte's letters to Brown and Loyson illuminate the broad points that troubled him during the period between 1880 and 1885 as he explored his religious identity. His later published statements and writing, as will be seen in following chapters, support and develop these. Vilatte believed that primitive Christianity was Catholic,

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<sup>124</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 9; 'A Card. To Whom It May Concern', *Door County Advocate*, 18 June 1887, p. 2; *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>125</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 9; Ancestry, *List of Passengers District of the City of New York, Port of New York*, 25 June 1885.

<sup>126</sup> 'Wisconsin', *The Churchman*, 11 July 1885, pp. 37-38. Vilatte however, says he returned to Green Bay on 3 July 1885: Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 9. Perhaps he is remembering the date he formally inaugurated his mission rather than his actual arrival?

<sup>127</sup> 'Religious Services', *Green Bay Weekly Gazette*, 9 July 1885, p. 3.

<sup>128</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 9-10; *Green Bay Weekly Gazette*, 11 July 1885, p. 3.

and that to be a true modern Christian one must also be Catholic.<sup>129</sup> However, Roman Catholicism had added its own doctrines, while Protestantism, in an effort to reform, removed some, but not all Roman additions, while at the same time dispensing with authentic doctrines.<sup>130</sup> Surely, he thought, among the many denominations there was one that maintained the true faith. It was not just doctrinal authenticity that Vilatte sought. Ecclesiology also contributed to his search. Romanism's emphasis on the Pope, the authority of the church, and its requirements for conformity and obedience were, he believed, incompatible with liberal, democratic changes in European and North American society. Protestantism promised liberty, but in disposing of the authoritative role of the historic episcopate, Protestantism introduced chaos and factionalism. His experience as a Protestant pastor had taught him, so wrote Vilatte to Brown, that 'it is of absolute necessity to the church conductors to maintain order, to have an eye open on those who are called to Ecclesiastic [*sic*] ministry and the Doctrine of Priest and to exercise ecclesiastic judgment, so that if there was no such bishops, "There should be some made"'.<sup>131</sup> Vilatte's experience as a Protestant missionary and Pastor also taught him the importance of the link between religious and ethnic culture. Protestant worship was barren and held little or no attraction to many European immigrants, especially

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<sup>129</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown, 3 January 1885; Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>130</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

<sup>131</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown, 15 December 1884 (emphasis in original).

the French and Belgians whose national culture was intimately interwoven with the cycles and liturgies of Catholic Christianity.<sup>132</sup> Doctrine, discipline, and worship: Vilatte's struggle with Roman Catholicism and with Protestantism was not a single issue conflict but a comprehensive reflection on the issues that mattered to him and his search for a religious identity.

Vilatte's first encounter with Chiniquy in 1880 challenged his thinking and in so doing set Vilatte on a difficult path to discover his own religious identity. In 1883 Chiniquy pointed Vilatte to Loyson, the man who would help him achieve the resolution he sought. Loyson in turn pointed the way to Brown, who would facilitate Vilatte's Independent Catholic mission because it matched his own beliefs and aims. These relationships were critical to Vilatte's journey. If, for example, Chiniquy, as a Presbyterian, had not been as sympathetic to Vilatte's predicament as in fact he was, his influence on Vilatte, if indeed he would then have had any, would have been very different. If Vilatte had met Loyson during his American tour of 1883 would he have persuaded Vilatte to return with him to Paris to work in his mission there? If Brown had been a low churchman, it is unlikely that Vilatte's letter to him in December 1884 would have succeeded in setting events in motion that resulted in his ordination in Berne. The encounters with these three men, Chiniquy, Loyson and Brown, not only helped to shape Vilatte's search, and his final resolution on a reformed Catholic identity, but they also each individually contributed, through

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<sup>132</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown, 15 December 1884.

Vilatte, to establishing the first Old Catholic mission in North America.

Throughout his four years as a Protestant missionary, Vilatte had demonstrated the physical stamina and personal temperament to bring people together and form communities. By the time of Bishop Brown's death in 1888, Vilatte had organised the mission parish of Bon Pasteur in Little Sturgeon, and built the church and rectory of the Precious Blood parish in Green Bay. He travelled the East Coast lecturing on Catholic reform and fundraising. Other former Roman Catholic clergy joined Vilatte: Ernest DeBeaumont, and Fr. Erastus Proth. With DeBeaumont, Vilatte planned to open an Old Catholic seminary in Green Bay. Although they later abandoned this project, the plan to build a separate Old Catholic seminary emphasised the fact that, as Old Catholics, Vilatte and his community had a separate and distinct identity from the Episcopalians and the Roman Catholics, which they intended to maintain. After five years of discernment and experimentation, Vilatte now had a clear sense of his own identity and purpose as a missionary for Catholic reform. The following chapters will explore his theological underpinning for Catholic reform, and how he sought to put that into practice.

### 3: Carving Out Independent Catholic Identity From Amongst Competing Catholicisms

Vilatte believed that the Roman Catholics had deformed Catholic identity, which Protestant efforts at reform had failed to resolve. They removed some, but not all of the Roman errors, but also some of the apostolic deposit of the faith.<sup>1</sup> When he approached Brown in 1884, Vilatte saw a need for a clear Catholic identity without either the qualifications of Romanism or the influence of Protestantism. With that, he believed he could vigorously oppose Roman error and engage Francophone immigrants who were falling into indifferentism, Spiritism and atheism, because of their opposition to the Roman Catholic church in North America, and the lack of appeal for them of the Protestant churches.<sup>2</sup> While Brown lived, Vilatte faced opposition from local Roman Catholic clergy who excommunicated him, declaring

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<sup>1</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown 15 Dec 1884.

neither he nor his congregation were Catholics.<sup>3</sup> Some Episcopalians also opposed the uniate Old Catholic mission. They saw the use of traditional Catholic rites and the teaching of Catholic doctrine, and urged him and his congregation to return to Rome.<sup>4</sup> Brown defended the experiment and argued that many immigrants would neither understand the Anglicans' cultural context, nor accept their ministry, and accused Episcopalian opponents of being short sighted and hypocritical.<sup>5</sup> Vilatte's response highlighted what he saw as the illiberalism of Romanism and its un-Catholic aberrations in doctrine, defending his Old Catholic identity and the cause of his mission — to empower people to be Catholic without giving allegiance to the Bishop of Rome. Only in the aftermath of Brown's death in 1888, when Vilatte found himself trapped between Roman Catholic opposition, Dutch Old Catholic lobbying, and American Anglo-Catholic anger, did he crystallise in print the key elements that carved out a clear Catholic identity as far removed from Romanism as it was from Protestantism,<sup>6</sup> which became the foundation of his Catholic reform platform. This chapter explores how Vilatte distinguished Independent Catholicism from Roman

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<sup>3</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, pp. 12-13; C. R. I. Crittenton, "'A Visit To The Old Catholic Church' In The Diocese Of Fond Du Lac", *The Churchman*, 29 January 1887, p. 92. This was followed by a response both from Vilatte, and H. H. Oberly in the 8 September edition; 'The Old Catholics', *The Churchman*, 8 September 1888, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, pp. 4-5; R. Whittingham, 'A Query', *The Churchman*, 25 August 1888, p. 16

<sup>5</sup> *Eighth Annual Council of The Diocese of Fond Du Lac*, Appendix A; 'Historical Record', *Church Review*, January 1888, p. 119; 'Religious Notes', *The Richmond Dispatch*, 4 December 1887, p. 3; *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 3.

Catholicism and Anglicanism, alongside some of the developments that drove him to do so.

The chapter is organised into three sections in roughly chronological order. The first deals with Vilatte positioning himself against the errors of Romanism. The second explores how the Dutch Old Catholics influenced Vilatte's thinking with respect of the Anglicans. The final section examines how the Episcopalian House of Bishops' condemnation of Vilatte in 1892 shaped his understanding of an Independent Catholic identity. Though the principal sources post-date 1890, Vilatte embarked upon his Old Catholic mission in 1885 knowing that he needed to present to Francophone immigrants a vision of Catholic identity without the Pope and free from the doctrinal innovations of Romanism. Unlike the subsequent sections, there is no known collection of correspondence, private or published, between Vilatte and Roman Catholic writers. Vilatte instead analysed the official Roman position, and countered it with an Old Catholic alternative. Though this section is disconnected from the two that follow, it demonstrates the pressure Vilatte experienced to clarify his Independent Catholic identity, in order to then set out his Catholic reform platform. The second section explores the Dutch lobbying of Vilatte, between 1889 and 1890, to separate himself from the Protestant Episcopalians to ensure that his Catholic identity was not damaged by Calvinist influence. These exchanges, and the events surrounding Vilatte's eventual consecration in 1892, form the backdrop of the

final section, about the Episcopalian House of Bishops' condemnation of Vilatte in 1892, and his response to it in 1893. The developments of 1889 to 1893 not only forced Vilatte to define a clear Catholic identity, they also led him to clarify or harden some of his anti-Calvinist positions in a way he had not done before.

### **Reclaiming 'Catholic' from 'Roman Catholic'**

Vilatte had to answer a key question for anyone interested in Catholic reform: is it possible to be a Catholic without also being a Roman Catholic?<sup>7</sup> His answer formed the backdrop of one of his early catchphrases: 'We are Catholics without any other qualification.'<sup>8</sup> Vilatte argued that Old Catholicism was the authentic Catholicism, but Roman Catholicism was defective. To do this, he separated Catholicism from Roman Catholicism and argued that Romanism, through its doctrinal and ecclesiastical innovations, lay outside the community of Catholic churches with a true claim to universality.

Frederick Katzer, then Roman Catholic bishop-elect of the diocese of Green Bay, summarised the Roman Catholic position on Catholic identity in a letter to one of Vilatte's supporters in 1886: 'There is but one Catholicism, the Roman, the true one.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 13.



The foundation of Katzer's claim (and of the Roman Church) was an exegesis of Matthew 16.18-19 that, they argued, proved that Christ invested Peter alone among all the Apostles with the leadership of the nascent church. Peter's unique role as the supreme head of the church was divinely instituted, therefore all of his successors, the Bishops of Rome, served as the centre of the universal Church.<sup>10</sup> On Patristic evidence, the Roman Catholic authorities argued that all of the other churches validated their orthodoxy, their Catholicism, by being in communion with Rome, the preeminent apostolic See.<sup>11</sup> Anyone not subject to or in communion with the Church of Rome was therefore not Catholic. When Roman Catholic writers, such as Katzer, and later John Powers of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, Wellington, Ohio, declared that Vilatte was no Catholic, they meant that not only was he not a Roman Catholic, but that he was therefore also not a *Catholic*.<sup>12</sup> Vilatte, to present an Old Catholic vision of Catholic reform in North America, had no choice but to delineate and defend a Catholic identity independent of that presented by the Roman Catholic Church.

'We cannot too strongly insist on the fact that these terms [Catholicism and

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<sup>10</sup> S. V. Ryan, *Claims of A Protestant Episcopal Bishop To Apostolical Succession And Valid Orders Disproved: With Various Misstatements Of Catholic Faith And Numerous Charges Against The Church And Holy See, Corrected And Refuted* (Buffalo: Catholic Publication Company, 1880), p. 22; Devivier, W., *Christian Apologetics: A Defense Of The Catholic Faith* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1903), p. 375, 377.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan, *Claims of A Protestant Episcopal Bishop Refuted*, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> John J. Powers, 'The Pope And America', *The Enterprise*, 29 August 1894, p. 4.

Romanism] are not synonymous. Quite the contrary, the one is as broad as the other is narrow, as comprehensive as the other is exclusive. The first is universal, the second local. Let this essential difference be well understood, and thenceforth Romanism would lose its prestige.<sup>13</sup> Vilatte believed that the Roman Catholics presented their local Catholicism as the universal standard, and imposed it on everyone else.<sup>14</sup> Vilatte viewed this as a historic problem originating before the Great Schism of 1054 when Rome broke Catholic unity. The Eastern Patriarchs, he argued, could barely keep the ambition of the Bishops of Rome in check, as they constantly appropriated to themselves powers not justified by Scripture or tradition.<sup>15</sup> The struggle to maintain an authentic Catholic identity would later be taken up by the Dutch, who fought to maintain their liberty and national Catholic identity. Since 1870, Swiss and German Catholics had joined them, 'rejecting the unchristian pretensions of the papacy to preserve themselves from ever-increasing

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<sup>13</sup> 'Catholicism and Romanism', *The Old Catholic*, March 1895, p. 4. Juxtaposing this image, writing in 1890, Vilatte praised the faithfulness of Utrecht. '[W]e cannot but believe God will reward her for her fidelity, and that the ancient archbishopric of Utrecht will attain to a consideration and dignity hitherto unknown': Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief 1890*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, *Differences Between Old-Catholics And Papalists*, Old-Catholic Tracts for the Times No. 1 (Chicago, n.d.), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, p. 3 and Joseph René Vilatte, *What Was Catholic Once Must Be Catholic Forever* (Chicago, n.d.), p. 5. An excerpt of this pamphlet appeared in the March 1896 edition of *The Independent Catholic*, Mar Alvares' paper in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and attributed *The Old Catholic* as the source. This means that Vilatte published the pamphlet sometime in late 1895 or 1896, and it shows that he and his community continued to share information with the church in India after his consecration in 1892: 'What Was Catholic One [sic] Must Be Catholic For Ever', *The Independent Catholic*, March 1896, p. 2.

innovations'.<sup>16</sup> Romanism's claims to orthodoxy and universality were false; only the Eastern Churches, and the European Old Catholics, maintained the apostolic doctrine as defined by the Ecumenical Councils.

Rome's separation from the rest of Catholicism allowed it to develop its own doctrine, diverging from an authentic Catholic identity. Vilatte perceived and highlighted a number of key Roman doctrinal innovations including the Filioque, the immaculate conception, papal infallibility, the claim of universal supremacy and the related claim that Rome was the source of authentic apostolic orders, and emphasised how they have no part in true Catholic doctrine. The Filioque is a corruption of the universal creed which orthodox theologians believe damages the theology of the trinity:<sup>17</sup>

So then the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils believed and taught in accordance with the words of the Gospel that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father; but in the West, even from the ninth century, the holy creed began to be falsified and the idea that the Holy Ghost proceeds 'also from the Son' to be arbitrarily promulgated.<sup>18</sup>

On the doctrine of the immaculate conception, Vilatte points out that until Vatican I,

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<sup>16</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, p. 7.

it had been the uniform belief that Christ alone was miraculously conceived: 'The prenatal sanctification has *ever been held*, her immaculate conception *never*. Old Catholics, therefore, accept the ancient doctrine and reject the novelty imposed upon the modern Latin churches by Pope Pius IX in 1854.'<sup>19</sup> Vilatte declared the doctrine of papal infallibility a blasphemous pretence: 'Infallibility belongs to God; and no man, no matter whatever he may be, has a right to imagine himself on a footing with God.'<sup>20</sup> Authentic Catholics never held such a doctrine:

Our forefathers who have handed down our Catholicity, never believed such a human invention and the first christians at Antioch and Rome knew that St. Peter was not Infallible; that he failed to confess His Saviour before the servant. 'And then the cock crew' which distinctly told him that he was not so. If St. Peter was not infallible, how can the supposed successors claim such a heavenly thing?<sup>21</sup>

While the East and the European Old Catholics maintained their fidelity to the doctrines of the seven councils, Rome with its continued innovation in doctrine moved farther away from orthodoxy and authentic Catholic identity: 'This is new Roman Catholicism, let us stick faithfully to the old. This doctrine must be put under

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<sup>19</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> 'One of The Reasons Why We Are Old Roman Catholics', *The Old Catholic*, January 1910, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> 'One of The Reasons Why We Are Old Roman Catholics', *The Old Catholic*, January 1910, p. 4.

the ban of excommunication, with all the modernists who also blaspheme against God, by their proud ambition.<sup>22</sup>

Rome presented itself as the centre of Catholic unity with all other churches in rebellion from the authentic heart of Christian communion and orthodoxy.<sup>23</sup> Vilatte believed that Rome had no rightful claim to be the centre of orthodoxy or unity, as it was the point of origin for numerous schisms, and an ever-accelerating falling away from orthodoxy. 'Romanism, once calling the whole of the West its own, broke in pieces and became the prolific mother of innumerable sects.'<sup>24</sup> Rome's schism from the rest of the Catholic world laid the groundwork for additional schisms such as Protestantism. Only those national churches faithful to the apostolic teaching and the decisions of the Fathers maintained an authentic Catholic identity but, Rome's catholicism was defective, not that of the Old Catholics and Eastern Churches.

Vilatte understood that any exploration of Catholic identity must include a discussion about the pivotal role apostolic succession plays in an understanding of what it means to be Catholic. Vilatte, like his European Old Catholic colleagues, the Orthodox, and the Roman Catholics believed that apostolic succession was an essential characteristic of Catholic identity.

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<sup>22</sup> 'One of The Reasons Why We Are Old Roman Catholics', *The Old Catholic*, January 1910, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Devivier, *Apologetics*, p. 311.

<sup>24</sup> Vilatte, *What Was Catholic Once Must Be Catholic Forever*, n.d., p. 7.

We believe that the Episcopate is as necessary for the life of the church as breath is for the life of man; that it is the common centre of unity and the guardian of the deposit of divine revelation; that bishops are equal in power and authority by divine right and that to them belongs the duty of defending the truth and Catholic traditions; to that end that the whole church being united under their guidance, here may ever be one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God, the Father of all, who is above all, over all, and in us all.<sup>25</sup>

The differences of his position from the official Roman Catholic position however, are important for what they say about Vilatte's vision of being Catholic. Jesus gave all of the Apostles the fullness of the apostolic charism, thus, Vilatte argued, all bishops by divine right possess fully and equally the power and authority of the apostolic order.

Stephen Ryan, Roman Catholic bishop of Buffalo, writing in 1880 asserted that from the beginnings of the church all bishops appealed to Rome to validate their legitimacy and to receive the authority to take up or hold their See because they acknowledged Peter's divine commission as the supreme authority over the church.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Ryan declared that:

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<sup>25</sup> 'The Episcopate', *The Old Catholic*, January 1910, p. 3, Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Ryan, *Claims of A Protestant Episcopal Bishop Refuted*, p. 22 (italics original).

...only in the Catholic Church, in communion with the See of Rome, *the* Apostolical See, can this identity be found and clearly demonstrated, and therefore all who hold this identity, this succession from the Apostles as a necessary characteristic, and distinctive mark of the Christian Church, must, if logical and consistent, go over to Rome, towards which their faces are plainly set.<sup>27</sup>

‘We are called Old Catholics because we have returned to the Catholicity of Scriptural and primitive times...For us, the Pope of Rome is neither the source, nor the unique channel of authority in the Church of God.’<sup>28</sup> Vilatte’s bold statement of identity denies that the Pope is the source of apostolic succession and Catholic identity. Vilatte’s rebuttal has three parts, exegetical, canonical, and historical. He devotes most of his effort to the exegetical. Vilatte argued that as the Roman church was separate from the rest of the orthodox, Catholic world, as such, it was not justified in claiming the right to arbitrate who possessed full, authentic apostolic succession. ‘The Roman Patriarch, if Orthodox, would be the first in ecclesiastical Rank, but, as heterodox, schismatic, and heretic, he has no power over or in the true Catholic church.’<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ryan, *Claims of A Protestant Episcopal Bishop Refuted*, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> ‘The Papacy’, *The Old Catholic*, January 1910, p. 5.

Vilatte's exegesis, like the Roman Catholic, also centres on Jesus's statement: 'I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'<sup>30</sup> Jesus repeats the phrase in Mathew 18.18, and again in the post-resurrection encounter with the Apostles in John 20.21-23. It is this last version which proves to be the most effective for Vilatte's argument.

It was not to Peter alone that Jesus gave the power to bind and to loose, but to all. It was not said to Peter only: Whosoever heareth thee heareth Me, and whosoever despiseth thee despiseth Me; but to *all* the Apostles....When Christ gave the commission — Teach all nations; whosoever sins you forgive they are forgiven, whosoever sins you retain they are retained — he was not speaking to Peter in any sense different from the others.<sup>31</sup>

Peter's role on the occasion described in Mathew 16 was as an oracle providing a moment of clarity for himself and for the Apostles, upon which the church would be built because of their understanding of who Jesus was.<sup>32</sup> Citing Ephesians 2.20 Vilatte carries forward the imagery of constructing the church. 'The Church is built upon the foundation of the Prophets and the Apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the Chief Corner Stone.'<sup>33</sup> Peter is only one foundation stone, equal among the other

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<sup>30</sup> Mt. 16. 19

<sup>31</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6.



Apostles, but Christ, not Peter, is the chief, and Peter is in no way superior to the others, or unique among them.<sup>34</sup>

Ryan exemplified the Roman Catholic argument that only Rome possesses and legitimately distributes apostolic succession (and the rights and duties that attend it). Therefore, in order to be Catholic one must also be Roman Catholic. Vilatte, through his alternative exegesis, argued that no such unique commission existed. He also pointed to the example of history (discussed above), and argued that in the face of opposition from the other Catholic churches, Rome was always attempting to arrogate to itself more power and authority than was justified by Scripture, or permitted by ecumenical decisions. Vilatte emphasised his point: 'The Pope holds his authority from the Church, not the Church from him. The Scriptures and the history of the Church show that the sovereignty resides, not in the will of any chief, but in the Church...'.<sup>35</sup> Vilatte's exegesis emphasised that the Apostles received equally the power of the Holy Spirit and Jesus' divine commission, which they in turn passed on to their successors. Bishops are 'equal in power and authority by divine right, and to them belongs the duty of defending the truth and Catholic traditions'.<sup>36</sup> The decisions of the whole Catholic church through Ecumenical Councils are Vilatte's guide. No bishop has jurisdiction outside his territory, including the Patriarchs:

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<sup>34</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 13.

‘neither the popes of Old or New Rome had any jurisdiction outside their limited patriarchates.’<sup>37</sup> The canons granted the Bishop of Rome the honour because Rome was the See of the old imperial capital, but that was not a grant of universal supremacy. The Roman Catholic claims to arbitrate Catholic identity through apostolic succession were, in Vilatte’s mind, untenable, unsupported by both Scripture and the collective decisions of the whole Catholic church. The Pope was no different from any other bishop, save that he, unlike Vilatte, was not an orthodox Catholic.

Vilatte believed that the Roman Church, unlike Old Catholicism, lay outside the communion of orthodox Catholic Churches. He argued that Romanism, because of its new doctrines, is a new sect whereas Old Catholicism is the continuation of orthodox western Catholicism. This was not only in keeping with, for example Döllinger’s belief, but Vilatte likely emphasised the point because of the proliferation of Christian and Christian-like sects in the United States at the turn of the century. Catholicism, he believed, is in a constant state of renewal and reform through the praxis of its communities, and the collective actions and decisions of the universal episcopate, all of whom participate in the fullness of apostolic succession.<sup>38</sup> In this way Vilatte distinguished the centralised authoritarian Roman Church from the

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<sup>37</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> ‘A Brief Sketch of The Belief of American Old Catholics’, *The American Old Catholic*, May 1915, 1-6, p. 2.

more independent and amorphous orthodox Catholicism. Though Vilatte asserted that Romanism's Catholic identity is disfigured, and sought to undermine its authority among potential converts, he did not do as the Roman Catholics did to other churches, and argue that the Roman church was therefore bereft of apostolic succession (thus being neither Catholic, nor a church). To have done so was not generally in Vilatte's character, and no doubt would have been viewed as folly and pretension by potential converts and allies. Confident in the technical defence of his Catholic identity, Vilatte stressed that it was meaningless without appropriate praxis.

Everyone knows that we are Catholic, but the world does not know that we will consider ourselves very bad Catholics if our charitable work did not reach all those in need - those who come to us, or those whom we discover. ... You may go and hear Mass every day, receive Holy Communion every week, light your candles before the shrine of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, or you may kiss the mul of the pope, or do many other forms of worship, if you have not the love for your brother or the poor irresponsible sinner, though he may be a heretic or schismatic you are not a Catholic.<sup>39</sup>

Vilatte did not want the authenticity of his Catholic identity to hang upon theological technicalities. Even though Romanists were heretical and schismatic, and therefore outside the communion of orthodox churches, Vilatte demanded charity

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<sup>39</sup> 'Our Altruist Point of View', *The Old Catholic*, January 1910, p. 4.

toward them and all people of goodwill.

### **Dutch Old Catholics Seek to Regularise Vilatte's Ties to Them, Make Him Reconsider His Ties to The Episcopalians**

Between 1888 and 1890 prominent Dutch Old Catholics, including Jan Heykamp, the Archbishop of Utrecht, and Cornelius Diependaal, the bishop of Deventer, wrote to Vilatte and urged him to sever his ecclesial connection to the Protestant Episcopal Church. Throughout that two year period, in addition to correspondence urging Vilatte to defend and preserve his Catholic identity, promises were made, and gifts sent, from Holland.<sup>40</sup> The pressure and the events it seeded not only led to the rupture between Vilatte and Grafton, and Vilatte's consecration in Ceylon in 1892, but they also allow us to understand the background that shaped the language of the Episcopalian House of Bishops' resolution of October 1892 condemning Vilatte. While he was prepared to have to defend his Catholic identity in the face of Roman Catholic objections, Vilatte became concerned when fellow Old Catholics suggested that his heretofore amicable relationship with the Episcopalians endangered his (and his community's) Catholic identity.

The correspondence began in May 1888, shortly after Bishop Brown's death. Herr

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<sup>40</sup> 'Rare Old Volumes', *The Weekly Wisconsin*, 3 May 1890, p. 2.

Wormhout, a parishioner of Fr. Harderwyk in Delft, read an account of Vilatte's mission, and wrote to him asking for more information about his work.<sup>41</sup> Vilatte replied, and shared with Wormhout his concern that Brown's successor might not be an Anglo-Catholic, which could cause problems for the mission, because of its close ties to the Episcopal diocese. 'Bishop Brown's successor might be a bishop who will not understand the relation of my missions to the diocese of Fond du Lac, and by refusing aid, would place unsurmountable obstacles in my way.'<sup>42</sup> Grafton was elected on 13 November 1888,<sup>43</sup> and consecrated on 25 April of the following year.<sup>44</sup> Now established, the Old Catholic community in Wisconsin had begun to consider its future, including the need for an American Old Catholic bishop.<sup>45</sup> Vilatte emphasised to Wormhout that when the time came for the Old Catholics in the United States to have their own bishop, he did not want that to rupture the close

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<sup>41</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 13. In August, 1888 *The Churchman* published an essay by Vilatte in which he carefully expressed his concerns about the continuation of the relationship between the American Old Catholics and the Episcopalians: R. Vilatte, 'The Old Catholics In The United States', *The Churchman*, 11 August 1888, 183-184, p. 183.

<sup>43</sup> He was the second choice; the first was George McClellan Fiske, Rector of the Anglo-Catholic St. Stephen's parish in Providence, Rhode Island. Fiske was elected in June 1888, but turned down the appointment at the urging of his congregation: John D. Alexander, 'Grafton And The Religious Life', Address given at the Grafton Festival, August 27, 2011, in the Cathedral of Saint Paul, Fond du Lac, WI, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> 'Consecration of A Bishop', *Green Bay Press Gazette*, 26 April 1889, p. 3. It is worth noting, especially in the context of what followed, that Vilatte was present, and (as usual) described as representing the Old Catholic missions.

<sup>45</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 13.

working relationship his American community enjoyed with the Episcopalians.<sup>46</sup>

Hoping for sound advice from other Old Catholics, Vilatte asked Wormhout to share his letter with Fr. Harderwyk.

Fr. Harderwyk, a Dutch Old Catholic priest in Delft, wrote to Vilatte on 4 July 1889. 'When you write to Herr Wormhout that it is necessary for you to have a bishop "*in perfect communion*" with the American Episcopal Church, I must say that to such a position and proposition I could never subscribe.'<sup>47</sup> Vilatte was probably not particularly surprised when he read this. Sometime in 1887 Fr. Oser, a Swiss Old Catholic priest, stayed with Vilatte for about a month, but refused to work for the mission because of its ties to the Episcopalians.<sup>48</sup> Harderwyk's opposition to Vilatte's ties to the Episcopalians was founded on two points; first their orders were doubtful, second, and probably more important to the Dutch, 'the American Episcopal Church is not Catholic in doctrine — her faith in the holy sacraments...is in nowise that of the primitive Church. The doctrine of the American Episcopal Church, as well as that of the Church of England, touching the holy sacrament of the altar and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is positively Protestant.'<sup>49</sup> At the time Vilatte wrote to Wormhout he had no idea of the chain of events his letter would set into motion. He

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<sup>46</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 13; Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 5 (emphasis in original).

<sup>48</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 5.

had inadvertently tapped into a vein of disquiet the Dutch Old Catholics felt regarding the relationship between the Anglicans and Loyson, and the Anglicans and the German and Swiss Old Catholics. The Dutch seized upon the opportunity, through Vilatte, to try to put distance between the Old Catholics and the Anglicans.

Concerned that a low churchman might succeed Brown, and by what he was seeing in his correspondence with the Dutch Old Catholic clergy, Vilatte published an essay in the 11 August 1888 edition of the Episcopalian newspaper *The Churchman*, which might be best described as an appeal to others within the Catholic wing of the Episcopal Church who shared his and Brown's vision of a broad, progressive, Catholicism for support.

Of these two Churches who claim Catholicity, one is certainly wrong; is it the Roman or the Episcopal Church? If the Roman Church is right, we, Old Catholics, have to break at once with the guilty one and go back to the Roman Communion. But if the Roman Church is wrong, and wants to hold its schismatical position, our duty is to oppose it, for it has its foot upon a ground that does not belong to it. It divides the body of Christ and violates Catholic principles. For us, Old Catholics who have left the Roman Church to join the Episcopal, after four years of hard labor, shall we remain quiet, being

satisfied with only one mission? No.<sup>50</sup>

One response penned by R. Whittingham, also published in *The Churchman* on 25 August, would not have given Vilatte any solace. Referring to Vilatte's congregants as 'converts, so called, from Roman Catholicism',<sup>51</sup> Whittingham strongly suggests that Vilatte and the Old Catholic mission were no different from the Roman Catholics.

Now it is very important before we contribute to this work that we should understand its purport. I have understood from what I suppose to be reliable authority that the reverend gentleman and his congregation teach and believe very nearly all the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church that are repudiated by this Episcopal Church which he tells us they have joined. In his appeal I notice the only ground taken is antagonism to the pope of Rome and a determination to fight him as an unlawful claimant for authority. Nothing is said about any of those corruption against which our branch of the Church protests, and those superstitions which our Prayer Book calls 'blasphemous, fables and dangerous deceits.'<sup>52</sup>

Vilatte knew that he and his Old Catholic congregation were not Roman Catholics,

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<sup>50</sup> R. Vilatte, 'The Old Catholics In The United States', *The Churchman*, 11 August 1888, 183-184, p. 183.

<sup>51</sup> R. Whittingham, 'A Query', *The Churchman*, 25 August 1888, p. 236.

<sup>52</sup> R. Whittingham, 'A Query', *The Churchman*, 25 August 1888, p. 236.



and neither were they Protestant Episcopalians; they were, he held, attached to the Episcopal Church as at least one wing of that church purported to be the Catholic Church of America. It was rapidly becoming clear to him that this position was a precarious one.

In his response to Whittingham, published on 8 September, Vilatte sets out some of the ways in which the Old Catholics differ from the Roman Catholics, including the use of the vernacular in worship, 'removing the papal rule of clerical celibacy',<sup>53</sup> and that they 'look for a restoration of the unity of the Church to an agreement among Christians on the basis of Holy Scripture interpreted, when needful, by the primitive Church.'<sup>54</sup> Vilatte also highlighted the importance of the reforming spirit of Old Catholicism, at least as he understood it. The Old Catholics, he wrote, 'are in these and other respects following the same course taken by our reformers in the sixteenth century.'<sup>55</sup> Vilatte believed that the Protestant reformers not only did not go far enough in their efforts to root out doctrinal error, but in their efforts they also damaged the apostolic deposit of faith, and thus their Catholic identity, and he believed this prior to 1893 when he wrote 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement'.<sup>56</sup> However, it is likely that this conviction crystallised during the period between Brown's death in 1888 and Vilatte's consecration in 1892.

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<sup>53</sup> R. Vilatte, 'The Old Catholics', *The Churchman*, 8 September 1888, p. 298.

<sup>54</sup> R. Vilatte, 'The Old Catholics', *The Churchman*, 8 September 1888, p. 298.

<sup>55</sup> R. Vilatte, 'The Old Catholics', *The Churchman*, 8 September 1888, p. 298.

<sup>56</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, pp. 1-5.

Underlining the difference between the Old Catholics and the Episcopalians, Vilatte quoted the Lambeth Bishops' statement from 1878. 'I read the following with regard to the old Catholics: ... "to those who are drawn to us in the endeavour to free themselves from the yoke of error and superstition we are ready to offer all help and such privileges as may be acceptable to them and are consistent with the maintenance of our own principles as enunciated in our formularies."' <sup>57</sup> The Old Catholic mission in Fond du Lac received help from the Episcopalians, and were attached to them, but they were themselves neither Roman Catholics, nor Protestant Episcopalians. Knowing what we know about the content of his exchanges with the Dutch, Vilatte's essay in *The Churchman* must be seen as a challenge to the Episcopalians, to prove to the American and the Dutch Old Catholics that they were not only truly Catholic, but that they were also serious about Catholic reform.

The Thirty-Nine Articles lay at the heart of the Dutch concerns. Bishop Herzog was convinced that the Thirty Nine Articles were an apparatus of the state.<sup>58</sup> Bishop Coxe, through his exchange of letters with the Dutch Old Catholic priest Theodore van Santen in 1890, tried to convince van Santen that they were merely a clerical catechism, which could be interpreted in light of Catholic doctrine.<sup>59</sup> Van Santen was not convinced, and told Vilatte 'Bishop Cleveland Coxe will never convince me that

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<sup>57</sup> R. Vilatte, 'The Old Catholics', *The Churchman*, 8 September 1888, p. 298.

<sup>58</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 15.

<sup>59</sup> 'A Letter To A Divine Of Utrecht' *The Churchman*, 8 February 1890, pp. 140-141; 'Letter From A Divine Of Utrecht', *The Churchman*, 3 May 1890, pp. 554-555.

the Anglican doctrine is Catholic. *That Church has no doctrine whatever; it is a veritable Babel*'.<sup>60</sup> Fr. Harderwyk, knowing that Herzog had ordained Vilatte, did not hide from Vilatte the Dutch church's disquiet in his letter of 1889. It is true, he wrote, that the Swiss and German bishops are in communion with the Anglicans. 'But I believe the prelates of Germany and Switzerland are led astray by the specious sayings of individuals... Thus they may feel united with certain individual bishops without being at all at one with the Anglican Church in general.'<sup>61</sup> At this early stage, in the spring of 1889, the conversation was only between Vilatte, another Old Catholic priest, and a prominent layman. Soon, however, the Dutch bishops weighed in. Vilatte took seriously the possibility raised by the Dutch clerics that his Catholic identity was in jeopardy because of his and the mission's connection to the Episcopal Church.

Jan Heykamp, Archbishop of Utrecht, wrote to Vilatte on 19 September 1889 and urged him 'not to rest in ecclesiastical communion with them [the Anglicans], nor ever accept from them any *religious* service.'<sup>62</sup> The Anglicans are not Catholics, insisted Heykamp, but Protestants, and he rejoiced that Vilatte wished to 'remain free from all Protestant influence'.<sup>63</sup> Heykamp's advice to Vilatte was direct: however

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<sup>60</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 15 (emphasis in original).

<sup>61</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 7 (emphasis in original).

<sup>63</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 7.

painful it might be for him, Vilatte must sever his ties to the Episcopalians. 'It is better, in the wilderness where divine providence has led us, to abandon ourselves wholly to God than to implore the spiritual succour of those who are not united with us in the same faith'.<sup>64</sup> Cornelius Deipendaal, bishop of Deventer, added his support to Heykamp's advice in a letter of 8 October 1889. Diependaal celebrated Vilatte's efforts to establish a 'Church truly Catholic, free from all Protestant admixture'<sup>65</sup> adding that Protestant Episcopalians are:

very far from the faith truly Catholic. In order, therefore, that the truly Catholic work may grow, it seems to me that, while ever preserving in your heart esteem and affection for their persons, you ought quietly and prudently to unloose whatever tie may bind you to communion with the Protestant Episcopal Church, which will in no wise serve for the advancement of your genuinely Catholic nascent Church.<sup>66</sup>

Diependaal did more than tell Vilatte that the Anglicans were heretical, and that in order to defend his Catholic identity Vilatte must sever his ties to the Episcopal bishop of Fond du Lac. The Dutch Church, he wrote, would not leave Vilatte and the American Independent Catholics without help once he carried out the bishops' advice.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 6.

The Dutch were concerned that the wider Old Catholic movement was in danger of losing its Catholic identity. The Swiss and German bishops' close ties to Anglo-Catholics in Britain and the United States opened the possibility for the introduction of a 'Protestant admixture' into their otherwise orthodox Catholic identity.

Hyacinthe Loyson's work received episcopal oversight first from Robert Eden, Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, and later from Bishop Coxe in New York. Though Loyson protested his Catholicism, the Dutch were no less concerned that his high profile example, the model set for Vilatte's work in Wisconsin, could lead to a loss of acknowledged Catholic identity for the whole Old Catholic project in North America. Loyson, in a letter to Herzog dated 6 September 1890, acknowledged the Dutch church's refusal to support him, and hoped that they would in time change their minds. Reporting from the Old Catholic congress in Cologne, later that month, Loyson highlighted the presence of the Dutch bishops, 'who were slow to espouse the reform, fearful lest we should deviate into sectarianism. But after twenty years of proof they now come forward and head the movement with its well tried and historic episcopate. Thus, the Old Catholic reform is assured.'<sup>68</sup> Their presence in Cologne bolstered the sense of unity established the previous year with the declaration of Utrecht. But the Dutch church remained unconvinced that the Anglicans were Catholic. The unexpected decision arrived at in that meeting,

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<sup>68</sup> 'Old Catholics Meet', *The Times*, 2 November 1890, p. 16.

however, would sting Vilatte and his community.

Vilatte did as he was advised, and severed his relationship with the Episcopalians in November 1889. Based on his correspondence with the Dutch Old Catholics, Vilatte was confident that they would fulfil their promises to aid the nascent Old Catholic movement in the United States. Vilatte was a successful organiser and fund-raiser, and he did not need promises of financial support, but the community did need its own bishop. Throughout the period, the letters from Holland urged Vilatte to hold fast to Catholic orthodoxy and not fall for the 'creature comforts of the Anglican church'.<sup>69</sup> Heykamp assured him that the issue of a bishop for the American Old Catholics was a priority for the Dutch bishops.<sup>70</sup> Van Thiel wrote to Vilatte early in 1890 praising his adherence to authentic Catholic identity, assuring him of van Thiel's personal support and his desire that the American Old Catholics would soon have a bishop of their own.<sup>71</sup> 'I pray that the Lord may bless the work of your mission, and that nothing will prevent our Church from procuring for you very soon the spiritual aid you need.'<sup>72</sup> Van Santen wrote to Vilatte that the Dutch bishops had 'a very great sympathy for you and your work in America,

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<sup>69</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> The complete letter, dated 7 February 1890, is published in: Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 19. An edited version of the same letter, dated 28 May 1890 is published in: Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 16. As both of these are published, rather than originals the date discrepancy cannot yet be resolved.

<sup>72</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 16.

especially because you are willing to be free from the Church of England.'<sup>73</sup> He also urged Vilatte to await the conclusion of the Old Catholic Congress in Cologne, believing that the Dutch opinion would prevail, and that Vilatte could breathe easier knowing that his anomalous situation would be settled.

The message Vilatte received from the Dutch was clear: sever your ties with the Protestant Episcopalians, and we will ensure that your nascent Old Catholic church has the means to continue its mission with a bishop of its own, suggesting that they believed it would or ought to be him.<sup>74</sup> Vilatte was also clear that although his community elected him to be consecrated on 16 November 1889, the choice of who served as the first Old Catholic bishop in the United States was up to the Dutch bishops.<sup>75</sup> Loyson wrote to Herzog on 6 September 1890, urging him to support the establishment of an Old Catholic hierarchy in the United States, and that in his opinion Vilatte ought to be the first consecrated. 'I esteem him, and I offer up prayers for his work. I think that he ought to be consecrated a missionary bishop, and I believe it is the duty of the Metropolitan Church of Utrecht to take that mission and the other missions of the French Language under his direction.'<sup>76</sup> Loyson's view that Vilatte, as a member of the Dutch church, ought to be given charge of all French

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<sup>73</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 31; Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 14.

<sup>74</sup> 'Personals', *The Independent*, 11 Oct 1889, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 17.

speaking churches is interesting. First, it would solve Loyson's problem of having to rely on Anglican bishops for episcopal oversight, as Vilatte would be his bishop. Second, Herzog probably viewed Loyson's proposal with suspicion; if carried out, it could shift the balance of influence within the European movement towards the more conservative Dutch, and impede the more liberalising approaches of the Swiss and German Old Catholic churches.

Van Santen also campaigned for Vilatte to be consecrated, and for the establishment of an independent Old Catholic hierarchy in the United States. Addressing both Loyson's relationship with the Dutch and the hoped-for establishment of an American hierarchy, van Santen wrote to Vilatte on 25 July 1890:

I hope he [Loyson] will withdraw his too intimate sympathies for the Anglicans, to become truly Gallican, that is to say, truly Catholic. It seems to me also that your church, when it has a bishop, should remain entirely free, but in communion with us, as are the provisory Churches in Germany and Switzerland. I do not believe it to be necessary for you to be under the jurisdiction of the Church of Holland, or any other Church.<sup>77</sup>

In a letter dated 30 May 1890, van Santen recalled Reinkens' statement at the previous Old Catholic Congress, that as long as the Anglicans adhered to the Thirty-

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<sup>77</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 15.



Nine Articles, the Old Catholics could not establish communion with them, adding that Herzog did not object. 'This is why I hope our bishops, united at Cologne will end the matter by aiding you in every possible manner, because you are Catholic like us'.<sup>78</sup> Van Santen closed the letter expressing his sympathy for Vilatte in his current difficulty, urging him to continue to cultivate his relationship with Bishop Vladimir, the Russian Orthodox bishop of Alaska, whose official residence was in San Francisco, 'that may become the source of reunion of the Greek and Old Catholic Churches' and promising that at 'Cologne I will speak in your favour, and against the too intimate relations of Bishop Herzog with the Anglican Church.'<sup>79</sup>

Vilatte began corresponding with the Russian Bishop Vladimir in late 1889 or early 1890. In February 1890 Vladimir praised his statement of faith, *A Sketch of Belief*, as being thoroughly orthodox. Writing to Vilatte in May, Vladimir confirmed his agreement with the Dutch position regarding the Catholic identity of the Anglicans. 'To speak truly, you are now under the jurisdiction of a prominent layman who calls himself a bishop. The opinion of the Archbishop of Utrecht about the heterodoxy of the Anglican Church is true. I am sorry the European Old Catholic bishops disagree in this case....Your endeavour to have a bishop for the Old Catholics in America is wise.'<sup>80</sup> Sympathising with Vilatte's position after the Cologne congress

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<sup>78</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 13.

<sup>79</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 13.

<sup>80</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 20.

unexpectedly decided to not establish an Old Catholic hierarchy in the United States, Vladimir invited him to visit him in San Francisco in January 1891. Vilatte accepted and it appears he stayed for much of February, returning to Green Bay by the first week of March. Vladimir visited Vilatte's congregations in early April 1891, publicly expressing his support for the Père and his struggle to maintain Catholic orthodoxy.<sup>81</sup> Vladimir's support guaranteed episcopal oversight for Vilatte's mission through the difficult period between late 1890 and Vilatte's departure for Ceylon on 15 July 1891.<sup>82</sup> Both men recognised the obstacles to a lasting partnership, and when Vilatte did depart for Ceylon, Vladimir contributed to fund his expenses.<sup>83</sup>

Grafton was in no doubt that he and the Anglican Church were Catholic. In 1905 Grafton published *Christian and Catholic*, in which he defended the church's Catholic identity and the validity of Anglican orders.<sup>84</sup> Six years later he published *The*

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<sup>81</sup> *The Weekly Wisconsin*, 18 April 1891, p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 26. The September 1892 edition of *The Independent Catholic* citing a Philadelphia press report, gives 10 July 1891: 'Made An Archbishop In Colombo Ceylon', *The Independent Catholic*, September 1892, p. 3. This appears to be an error as Vilatte was naturalised as an American citizen on 11 July 1891. Vilatte's application for an emergency passport in London on 13 July 1898 dates his naturalisation on 1 June 1891, and his departure from the United States on 3 June 1891, arriving in Antwerp on 14 June for his onward journey to Colombo: Ancestry, *Vilatte Emergency Passport Application*, London, 13 July 1898. Parisot suggests that the journey may not have gone according to plan, and was long and arduous: Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 26.

<sup>83</sup> Vilatte to Coxe September 1892 in: *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 9.

<sup>84</sup> Charles C. Grafton, *Christian And Catholic* (New York: Longmans, Green, And Co., 1905).

*Lineage From Apostolic Times of the American Catholic Church Commonly Called the Episcopal Church*.<sup>85</sup> Upon taking up responsibility for the diocese he sought to make it Catholic. Protestants, he wrote to Heykamp in 1890, were in error, and without sacramental grace.<sup>86</sup> He actively purged low church clergy from his diocese, boasting in a letter to the *Church Times* in 1891 that his diocese 'is filling up with good Catholic priests.'<sup>87</sup> Grafton believed it was his mission to Catholicise the Episcopal church.

God has given us our work to do which is unlike that of any other body of Christians, and though we are but few, yet the church is becoming Catholic, and when it does become truly Catholic in worship and life and action as we know she is between the covers of her prayerbook, she will then be a harbor of refuge in the coming sectarian and Roman convulsions.<sup>88</sup>

Grafton's use of 'sectarian' to refer to Protestants was not unusual: Coxe, and the Roman Catholics used it as well. He must have taken grave offence at the Dutch and Russian bishops, through their correspondence with Vilatte, telling him that he was little more than a Protestant layman, rather than a true bishop of the American

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<sup>85</sup> C. C. Grafton, *The Lineage From Apostolic Times of The American Catholic Church Commonly Called The Episcopal Church* (Milwaukee: The Young Churchman Company, 1911).

<sup>86</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> 'Opposed In Oshkosh: High Church Customs of Bishop Grafton', *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, 17 April 1891, p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> 'Opposed In Oshkosh: High Church Customs of Bishop Grafton', *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, 17 April 1891, p. 1.

Catholic Church.<sup>89</sup>

Grafton believed that he was the sole Catholic bishop of Fond du Lac, and was determined not to allow the establishment of a competing missionary Catholic hierarchy in his territory. Vilatte confided in Grafton in early April 1890, showing him the correspondence he received from the Dutch urging him, for the sake of his own Catholic identity, to sever his ties with the Anglicans. After meeting Vilatte Grafton wrote to Heykamp, making it clear that he would not tolerate another Catholic body working in Fond du Lac. 'As it seems to be your idea that the new Bishop should not enter into ecclesiastical relations with the Catholic Hierarchy in this country, either Anglican or Roman, or ever accept from them "any religious service", Monseieur [*sic*] Vilatte would consequently be forced to leave his present position and begin work elsewhere.'<sup>90</sup> Grafton's position later hardened, demanding that Vilatte leave the country.<sup>91</sup> In the same letter, Grafton stated that establishing an independent hierarchy would 'seem in the eyes of many, a Schismatical Church, established here in opposition to the existing hierarchy'.<sup>92</sup> The 'eyes of many' were in fact only Grafton's own. Writing to Vilatte from Baltimore on 15 April 1890 Grafton expressed his hope that 'the Old Catholic Bishops after conference with our own,

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<sup>89</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 4, 20.

<sup>90</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 23.

<sup>91</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>92</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 24.

will not make a further rent in the Body of Christ by setting up an independent and rival Church in this country.<sup>93</sup> In Grafton's estimation the Old Catholics, like the Roman Catholics, had 'no right to interfere' in the United States, which belonged to the American Catholic Church, that is, the Protestant Episcopal Church.<sup>94</sup>

Van Santen was confident that the Dutch position would prevail during the Old Catholic congress at Cologne held between 12 and 15 September of 1890. On 25 July 1890 he wrote to Vilatte:

I certainly believe that then our bishops in Holland will convince Mgr. Herzog; and since he has still need of them, as well as Bishop Reinkens, you will have to be free and entirely independent of the Anglican Church...And should Mgr. Herzog not consent with them for your consecration, I believe they would rather unite with you than with Bishop Herzog.<sup>95</sup>

From the conference he sent a hurried note to Vilatte on 15 September 1890 which gave every indication that the American Old Catholics would soon have the support of the European Churches for their own bishop. 'You will soon hear the resolutions of the conference of Bishops, and if you do not ask too much, you will be made very happy, I believe. I am not allowed to write you more at present.'<sup>96</sup> Van Santen's

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<sup>93</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 26.

<sup>94</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>95</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 14.

<sup>96</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 15.

language suggested that he may even have been writing with the permission of, or at the instruction of one of the Dutch bishops. In the end, Van Santen along with the other Dutch clergy, and Loyson who was also present, and who, nine days earlier had written to Herzog urging him to support Vilatte's consecration, were misreading the situation and overly optimistic.

There appears to have been no mention of the question of an American hierarchy in press reports published from the conference in British papers. Mentions of the congress published in American papers included statistics of European Old Catholic numbers but made no mention of the American mission. Even Bishop Coxe's report to the *Buffalo Morning Express* on 7 September 1890, before the conference convened, made no mention of Vilatte or the Old Catholic mission in the Episcopal diocese of Fond du Lac.<sup>97</sup> In the end, the views of the Swiss and German bishops prevailed over those of the Dutch. Vilatte states that he learned of the bishops' decision when he received his copy of *Le Catholique Francais*, Loyson's Old Catholic paper published a few weeks later.

All things considered, while we do not regard the Anglican Church as perfect, yet it is our opinion that it is our duty to aid her reformation in a Catholic direction, above all since a great movement is already operating within her in that sense. And we consider that it is not good to put an Old Catholic

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<sup>97</sup> 'Church Congress At Cologne', *Buffalo Morning Express And Illustrated Buffalo Express*, 7 September 1890, p. 16.

Episcopate side by side with hers and so produce the scandal of a schism.<sup>98</sup>

Vilatte it seems, received no formal communication about the decision. This may not have been an accident, as will be discussed below. The bishops' decision also says a great deal about the perceived importance of the Anglo-Catholic movement within the Anglican Church, and also follows the same line of thought as Grafton's language who believed that the Anglo-Catholic party would purge the Protestant elements from within the Protestant Episcopal Church and make it wholly Catholic.

The Bishops' decision at Cologne stung Vilatte. For more than a year the Dutch had pressed Vilatte to sever his ties to the Episcopalians. It was a scandal that he, a Catholic priest, answered to a Protestant minister. Vilatte, they argued, must prove his loyalty to the Old Catholic cause, and sever his ties with the Episcopalians, thus freeing himself from heretical Protestant influences. If he did this, they assured him of their support and their plan to further the establishment of an orthodox Catholic church in the United States, independent of Anglican influence. Vilatte did as he was instructed by those he understood to be the leaders of the Old Catholic movement, and now he and his community had been abandoned. Fr. Gautier, whom Herzog ordained for the American Old Catholics in 1889, received a letter from him late in 1890 ordering him to answer to Grafton.<sup>99</sup> Herzog wrote to Vilatte on 24 March 1891

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<sup>98</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 2.

<sup>99</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 44.

'I do not see how ...you are not as you say, "*a protestant episcopalian*." [sic] In the numerous letters you have addressed to me, you prove only that you were under the jurisdiction of the *venerable Catholic bishop Grafton*;' and added that he wanted nothing more to do with Vilatte.<sup>100</sup> The trustees of Vilatte's Old Catholic parish in Dyckesville published a letter declaring that they would never become Protestants, and that they would resist Grafton's attempts to make them so.<sup>101</sup> There was, however, a glimmer of hope for Vilatte and his followers.

Van Santen, in his letter to Vilatte in May, 1890, encouraged Vilatte to continue to cultivate his relationship with Bishop Vladimir in the interests of future Old Catholic-Orthodox reunion, but that was not the only reason. 'I hope our five bishops united at Cologne will end the matter by aiding you in every possible manner, because you are Catholics like us...and if you receive no aid from the Old Catholic bishops, you are obliged to address yourself to the Greek bishops, whose schism does not hinder them from being Catholics.'<sup>102</sup> Van Santen was not the only Old Catholic who held this position: Reinkens considered seeking consecration from the Armenians, Michaud<sup>103</sup> proposed entering into communion with, and acquiring

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<sup>100</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 22.

<sup>101</sup> E. Debaker, 'Concerning The Old Catholic Mission', *Green Bay Post-Gazette*, 7 November 1890, p. 3.

<sup>102</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 13.

<sup>103</sup> 'As no particular Catholic Church can be established (or organized) except by a legitimate Episcopate, the association of old Catholics which may not find a legitimate and apostolic Episcopate in the West, will seek it in the Church of the East



apostolic orders from 'the Church of the East', and even Loyson concurred. Vilatte did as van Santen advised. Vladimir's support and patronage proved crucial in the transition period between October 1890 and Vilatte's departure for Ceylon in July 1891.

Vilatte recognised that he needed to draw a line under the situation and regain control. Vilatte at first appears to have contemplated going to Utrecht 'to inform the archbishops and synod *viva voce* of the position in which the missions are placed by their decisions.'<sup>104</sup> However, on 23 October 1890, Vilatte wrote to Heykamp, thanking him for his efforts, and explaining that he and his community would continue with the aid of Bishop Vladimir.

Today, I come to ask you not to do anything for me or my Church in America.

I propose to continue my work in America under the protection of His Eminence Mgr. Vladimir, who will be a protector capable of judging our position in a more impartial way, seeing that Mgr. Vladimir receives no aid from Episcopal or Anglican Protestants for building his churches. Then His Eminence has the spirit of America, he has lived here for some time and is better able to judge of our position than Europe, without any aid or

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after having entered into communion with it': Eugène Michaud, *Proposed Programme For the Consideration of The Old Catholics And All Christian Communions*, transl. by John Stannage (Ontario: A McPherson, Printer and Bookseller, 1872), pp. 1-2.

<sup>104</sup> 'Fr. Vilatte Not Ambitious But Consistent', *Green Bay Weekly Gazette*, 29 October 1890, p. 1.

‘information’ from persons whose interest it is to see the work of the Old Catholics in America die out.<sup>105</sup>

Vilatte’s language in opening the letter suggests that a long letter from Herzog, possibly that dated 3 October 1890, exasperated him, and caused him to change his mind about going to Utrecht.<sup>106</sup>

Vladimir had from the beginning of their correspondence expressed his support for Vilatte’s project, and, like Heykamp, urged him for the sake of his Catholic identity to break off his relations with the Protestant Grafton. In April of 1890, Vilatte wrote two letters to Vladimir in which he detailed the developments, with himself in the middle, between the Dutch hierarchy, Herzog and Reinkens, and Grafton.<sup>107</sup> In the same letters, Vilatte expressed his concern that Grafton might succeed in blocking the American Independent Catholics acquiring a bishop of their own. In such an event, he asked, would Vladimir be able and willing to take the mission under his protection? Vilatte’s letters demonstrated that he was tuned into the direction of developments, that he was not entirely unaware of the likely outcome, but that he still held out hope that in the end, the Dutch would prevail. In his response, Vladimir sympathised with Vilatte’s predicament, praised him for his

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<sup>105</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 41.

<sup>106</sup> Herzog mentions this letter in the letter to Vilatte dated 24 March 1891, it is from the March letter that we can get a sense of the tone and content of the October correspondence: Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 22.

<sup>107</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 28.

orthodoxy, and urged Vilatte to remain steadfast.<sup>108</sup> Vladimir supported Vilatte's desire to acquire an Old Catholic bishop for the mission in America, but admitted that alone, he did not have the authority to make that decision and would need to appeal to the Holy Synod in Russia.<sup>109</sup> Vladimir, in the meanwhile, took Vilatte and his missions into his episcopal protection.<sup>110</sup>

Fr. Prins, the Dutch Old Catholic priest of Almsmeer, wrote to an unnamed member of Vilatte's community on 16 May of 1891 a letter in which he expressed his admiration of Vilatte for having stood his ground. 'A tragic conclusion, but a necessary consequence of an improper union. Yet, it is certainly fortunate that, even tho' in such a manner, the Rev. Père Vilatte is loosed from every relation with the Episcopal Church...May the Lord of the Church bless you.'<sup>111</sup> Prins was one of the authors of a report for the General Assembly of the Dutch Old Catholics in 1889 titled *On the Succession of Bishops in the English Church* which appears to have begun

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<sup>108</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>109</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 29.

<sup>110</sup> Vladimir wrote Vilatte on 11 February 1891; 'you are Orthodox Old Catholics and cannot be subject to a Protestant jurisdiction, because the canons of the Church prohibit it...We shall sustain you as a true brother in Christ, beloved and esteemed by all true Christians': Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 21. He sent a pastoral letter to the Old Catholics on 11 March 1891, praising their support of Vilatte, and urging them to remain faithful to their Catholic orthodoxy: Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 47-48. He visited the missions on 18 April 1891: *The Weekly Wisconsin*, 18 April 1891, p. 4. On 9 May Vladimir issued a letter certifying his episcopal protection of Vilatte and the Old Catholics under his pastoral care: Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 50; and an excerpt in Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 21-22.

<sup>111</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 12.

the exchanges between van Santen and Coxe in 1890. The developments surrounding the Dutch lobbying Vilatte to put distance between his mission and the Anglicans, led to his consecration in Colombo on 29 May 1892. Vilatte's exchanges with van Santen, Heykamp, and Vladimir clarified his understanding of the differences between orthodox Catholicism and Anglicanism, a position he held for the rest of his career. Finally, the events surrounding Vilatte's direct engagement with the Dutch provide key background information for the language used in the October 1892 House of Bishops resolution condemning Vilatte.

### **PECUSA's 1892 Condemnation of Vilatte**

On 15 July 1891, Vilatte travelled to Ceylon and spent nine months working with the Syrian Orthodox Church there while awaiting final sanction for, and the arrangement of, his consecration, which took place on 29 May 1892. The events surrounding his consecration are discussed more fully in chapter seven below. This final section of this chapter considers the consequences of Vilatte's consecration for his relations with the Episcopal Church. During Vilatte's time in Ceylon, Grafton sent a number of angry communications to Mar Alvares that he had no right to consecrate Vilatte. With Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV's approval, the consecration proceeded, and Vilatte returned to the United States in July, 1892. Five months after Vilatte's consecration, the House of Bishops, meeting during the 1892 General

Convention in Baltimore, passed a resolution condemning Vilatte as neither Catholic nor a bishop. Once again, Vilatte had to define and defend his Catholic identity, this time in the face of Protestant Episcopal objections. The report which supported the House of Bishops resolution contained five conclusions, which were shaped, in part, by the events that led to the breakdown between the Independent Catholic community under Vilatte and Bishop Grafton. The resolution was both a reflection of Grafton's continued anger and opposition to Vilatte, as well as his criticism of the Dutch Old Catholics, and now also Mar Alvares. This fact did not go unnoticed, either by the Episcopal criticism of the resolution, or by Vilatte in his two rebuttals, particularly that published in January 1893.

Croswell Doan, the bishop of Albany, presented the Council's report 'as to the claim of J. René Vilatte to have been consecrated a bishop' on 22 October.<sup>112</sup> The Council concluded that 'the bishops from whom M. Vilatte claims to have received consecration belonged to a body which is separated from Catholic Christendom because of its non-acceptance of the dogmatic decrees of the Council of Chalcedon as to our blessed Lord's Person'.<sup>113</sup> The same bishops, having no jurisdiction in Fond du Lac, had no right to 'ordain a bishop for any part of the diocese'.<sup>114</sup> No 'duly

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<sup>112</sup> *Journal of The Proceedings of The Bishops Clergy And Laity of The Protestant Episcopal Church, The United States of America, General Convention Held in The City of Baltimore, October 5 to October 25 Inclusive, The Year of Our Lord 1892* (1893), p. 122.

<sup>113</sup> *PECUSA General Convention 1892*, p. 122.

<sup>114</sup> *PECUSA General Convention 1892*, p. 122.

accredited' synod elected Vilatte to the episcopacy.<sup>115</sup> Seeking episcopal office, Vilatte lied about the 'facts of the case, and seemed willing to join in with any body, Old Catholic, Greek, Roman, or Syrian, which would confer it upon him.'<sup>116</sup> Finally, 'two months before the time of his so-called consecration, he had been deposed from the sacred ministry.'<sup>117</sup> In light of these findings, the Council proposed two resolutions. The first expressed the opinion of the house, that 'the whole proceedings in connection with the so-called consecration of J. René Vilatte were null and void, and that this Church does not recognize that any Episcopal character was thereby conferred'.<sup>118</sup> The second proposed that a copy of the report be sent to the Archbishop of Utrecht, and to the Old Catholics of Germany and Switzerland, as well as other Anglican primates. The House of Bishops adopted both resolutions.

The report's wording, in keeping with Grafton's and later Herzog's official stance, assumes that Vilatte was an Episcopalian priest. Neither Vilatte, his congregations, nor the media of the day referred to him (or themselves) as anything other than Old Catholic. The report omits the uncomfortable truth that from its inception the mission was a quasi-uniate project. Heykamp, van Santen, and others were clear: Vilatte was a true orthodox Catholic priest, the Protestant Episcopalians

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<sup>115</sup> *PECUSA General Convention 1892*, p. 122.

<sup>116</sup> *PECUSA General Convention 1892*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>117</sup> *PECUSA General Convention 1892*, p. 123.

<sup>118</sup> *PECUSA General Convention 1892*, p. 123.

were not, and as such, the Catholic Vilatte could not be answerable to the Protestant Grafton. The Syrian church's rejection of Catholic doctrine, the report declared, meant that they were not Catholic. The subsequent resolution denied them the possibility of transmitting apostolic succession and consecrating Vilatte. This was not merely a criticism of the Syrian bishops for not recognising the Catholicity of the Episcopal Church and for acquiescing to Grafton's demands not to consecrate Vilatte. It was also a criticism of the Dutch Old Catholics for employing a parallel argument that denied that the Anglicans were Catholic because of the Thirty-Nine Articles. To express such an opinion regarding Syrian orders, when it was widely recognised that they were in fact Catholic, seems futile, unless one considers that the real message was that everyone knew that Anglicans are Catholic. Pointedly, a copy of the report was sent to the Archbishop of Utrecht, but not to Mar Alvares or the Patriarch, which seems to imply that this was the intended message. Grafton was, from the beginning of his correspondence with Heykamp, adamant that he would not tolerate the establishment of a parallel Catholic hierarchy in *his* territory. The report's assertion that the Syrians had no authority to consecrate a bishop for 'any part of the Diocese under the charge of the Bishop of Fond du Lac'<sup>119</sup> must also be read as a not so veiled criticism of Heykamp and the Dutch Old Catholics for daring to interfere in the affairs of another Catholic body. Because of recent positive developments between the Anglicans and the Old Catholics, however, it would have

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<sup>119</sup> *PECUSA General Convention 1892*, p. 122.

been impolitic to have criticised their actions more openly.

The House of Bishops' condemnation did not go unquestioned from within the Episcopal Church. On 8 March 1893 John Anketell, an Episcopalian priest in the diocese of New York, wrote to the editor of the *Church Eclectic* examining the errors of the premises supporting the resolution. Anketell had an interest in the Eastern Churches. He wrote a letter to the editor of the *Guardian* in April 1891 to correct a number of previously published statements about baptism, chrismation, and ordination in the Orthodox Churches.<sup>120</sup> In that letter, Anketell also mentioned his knowledge of Bishop Jules Ferrette, a precursor to Vilatte, consecrated by Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV while he was still Ecumenical Metropolitan resident in Homs in 1866. Ferrette worked briefly in England before leaving the country, eventually settling in Switzerland. Anketell was a self-professed disciple of Coxe.<sup>121</sup> He appears to have had access to Vilatte's September 1892 letter to Coxe, in which Vilatte states that his trip to Ceylon was made possible in part by Bishop Vladimir's generosity.<sup>122</sup> Anketell's letter appears to be the only such intervention, and may have been written at Coxe's instigation. More general media coverage of the General Convention at the time did not mention the resolution.

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<sup>120</sup> 'Baptism And Confirmation', *Guardian*, 6 May 1891, p. 37.

<sup>121</sup> J. Anketell, 'Audi Alteram Partem', *The Church Standard*, 25 December 1897, p. 278.

<sup>122</sup> John Anketell, 'Correspondence: J. René Vilatte', *The Church Eclectic*, April 1893, p. 66.



Anketell emphasised that he wrote as an impartial observer being ‘neither the friend nor the foe of the claimant’.<sup>123</sup> He reproduced the five findings of the report, adding that: ‘If these premises be well taken, the conclusion arrived at follows logically and certainly.’<sup>124</sup> Anketell proceeds to dismiss each in turn. The best theological authorities agree that the Syrian church is not heretical. ‘But conceding its heresy, that does not vitiate its Orders, which are acknowledged alike by Greeks and Latins.’<sup>125</sup> Countering the statement that the Syrians were sending Vilatte as an interloper into the jurisdiction of the diocese of Fond du Lac, Anketell emphasised that Vilatte claimed no jurisdiction over Episcopalians, but only Old Catholics in America, adding that if the House of Bishops’ statement were true, then Archbishop Katzer, and the other Roman bishops in Wisconsin equally had no right to minister in the region. ‘Concurrent jurisdiction is and has been an established principle of the Oriental church since the great schism...But if one cannot minister to Old Catholics, what right have our priests on the continent of Europe, or in any Roman Catholic country?’<sup>126</sup> As to the claim that Grafton’s having deposed Vilatte two months

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<sup>123</sup> John Anketell, ‘Correspondence: J. René Vilatte’, *The Church Eclectic*, April 1893, p. 65. In another letter published in *The Church Standard* in December, 1897 Anketell expressed his disapproval both of Loyson and Vilatte: ‘Audi Alteram Partem’, *The Church Standard*, 25 December 1897, p. 278.

<sup>124</sup> John Anketell, ‘Correspondence: J. René Vilatte’, *The Church Eclectic*, April 1893, p. 65.

<sup>125</sup> John Anketell, ‘Correspondence: J. René Vilatte’, *The Church Eclectic*, April 1893, pp. 65-67.

<sup>126</sup> John Anketell, ‘Correspondence: J. René Vilatte’, *The Church Eclectic*, April 1893, p. 66.

before his consecration made him ineligible to receive episcopal dignity, Anketell asks: 'M. Vilatte is deposed for *us*. Is he for the Old Catholics?'<sup>127</sup> Countering the assertion that Vilatte had not been properly elected, Anketell highlights the example of St. Ambrose. 'This at once nullifies the *supposed* consecration of S. Ambrose, the great Archbishop of Milan, who was elected by the voice of an unknown child...'<sup>128</sup> Anketell's point is clear: the House of Bishops' resolution declaring Vilatte invalid and a non-Catholic was misguided, and based on faulty premises.

Did Anketell recognise the secondary intention of the House of Bishops' resolution? His published commentary on the resolution suggests that Anketell was aware, at least in part, of the developments which led to the report and its resolutions. Throughout his letter to *The Church Eclectic*, Anketell points to parallel examples of Herzog and Reinkins. Vilatte's consecrators were orthodox, and adhered to the decisions of the Ecumenical councils as much as did Bishops Herzog and Reinkins. If Vilatte's deposition impedes his eligibility for episcopal consecration, what of Herzog and Reinkins, both deposed Roman Catholic priests, who were later consecrated by the Old Catholics? He speaks positively of Herzog, while at the same time making no mention of the Dutch Old Catholic bishops. In a letter published in 1897, Anketell is clear that he disapproves of the 'fat witted' Dutch hierarchy's

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<sup>127</sup> John Anketell, 'Correspondence: J. René Vilatte', *The Church Eclectic*, April 1893, p. 67 (emphasis in original).

<sup>128</sup> John Anketell, 'Correspondence: J. René Vilatte', *The Church Eclectic*, April 1893, p. 66 (emphasis in original).

attitude towards the Anglicans, but blames their disagreeableness on misunderstanding and Roman Catholic slander.<sup>129</sup> Anketell's letter suggests that he believes that condemning Vilatte as the bishops did in October 1892, was the best way neither to manage Vilatte nor to make a statement to the Dutch Old Catholic bishops.

Vilatte responded to the House of Bishops' resolution attacking his Catholicity in two distinct publications. The first is an extended essay, 'An Open Answer and A Frank Statement' which appeared in the January 1893 edition of the *The Old Catholic*, the monthly organ of the Independent Catholic churches which he led, as well as the March and April 1893 editions of the *Independent Catholic*, in Colombo.<sup>130</sup> It contains a long theological analysis of the differences between the Anglicans and the rest of the Catholic world. Vilatte takes the opportunity to use as an example the consecration of Phillips Brooks, who, he argues, is barely Christian, let alone Catholic, and as the House of Bishops assented to his consecration, it brings their own Catholic identity into question; a clear parallel with the House of Bishops' resolution attacking him. On the whole this essay is the more refined and thoughtful. The second, a pamphlet titled *Encyclical to All Bishops Claiming to be of the apostolic*

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<sup>129</sup> J. Anketell, 'Audi Alteram Partem', *The Church Standard*, 25 December 1897, p. 278.

<sup>130</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, pp. 1-5; René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Independent Catholic*, April 1893, pp. 2-3. I have only the April edition which states it is the continuation from the March 1893.

*succession*, was published in December.<sup>131</sup> This later version appears to have been designed to be a companion to *Ecclesiastical Relations Between The Old Catholics of America and Foreign Churches*, which the church published at the start of the year. It is punchier, shorter, and focusses strictly on refuting the 1892 resolution on a point-by-point basis. Both works emphasise two key points: the divergence in doctrine, and whose opinion judging the orthodoxy and validity of orders is likely to be more authoritative.

Vilatte opens his rebuttal with a clear defence of the Catholicity of Mar Alvares, Mar Gregorius, and Mar Athanasius, who consecrated him on the Patriarch's order. These men, 'whom the Protestant Episcopalians so rashly pronounce as separated from Catholic Christendom...fully accept the Nicene Creed and the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon as to the person of our Blessed Lord.'<sup>132</sup> This fact, he adds, can be easily verified by consulting works of independent scholarship, or by asking the Russian Orthodox prelates.<sup>133</sup> Finally, to remove all possible doubt, Vilatte quotes the section of the credal statement he recited at his consecration which detailed the theology of the Incarnation. 'My consecrators, then, like myself and you, Venerable Brothers confess that our blessed Lord is "perfect God and perfect man,"

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<sup>131</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, *An Encyclical To All Bishops Claiming To Be Of The apostolic succession* (1893).

<sup>132</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 1.

and thus the human nature and the divine nature were preserved without confusion.<sup>134</sup> For Vilatte the only logical conclusion to his evidence is that his consecrators, like him, are Catholic.

If, however, the reader still does not accept the facts of their doctrinal orthodoxy, Vilatte reminds them that heresy does not vitiate the validity of orders. Assume, he asks, for the sake of argument, that his consecrators were Monophysite heretics. Anglican priests have gone to Persia 'under the auspices of the Archbishop of Canterbury with the fullest recognition of the validity of Assyrian Orders, tho the Nestorians have been separated from Catholic Christendom since A.D. 431.'<sup>135</sup> How is this any different from the supposed Syrian heresy? If the House of Bishops is to judge his Catholicity based on a belief that his consecrators were heretical, then it is reasonable to ask about Anglican orders, given that tradition's 'non-acceptance of the dogmatic decrees of the Divinely-inspired Seventh Ecumenical Council concerning the proper worship of the saints and holy images'.<sup>136</sup> Vilatte believed that the point was not worth further evidence, for unlike Anglican orders, 'the Syrian Jacobite succession is admitted by all the Churches, Latin, Greek, Copt, Armenian, and Old Catholic.'<sup>137</sup> Vilatte emphasised that he has no desire to question or

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<sup>134</sup> Vilatte, *Encyclical*, p. 2.

<sup>135</sup> Vilatte, *Encyclical*, p. 2.

<sup>136</sup> Vilatte, *Encyclical*, p. 2.

<sup>137</sup> Vilatte, *Encyclical*, p. 3.

disparage Anglican orders, only to prove the thorough Catholicity and validity of his own. 'I am establishing my own hierarchical position, and not disparaging that of others. Seeing therefore that this most ancient Syrian succession was conferred upon me, its authority being indubitable, while it was not obtained under false pretences, I maintain that my episcopal consecration is as impregnable as Holy Writ itself.'<sup>138</sup>

The House of Bishops denied Vilatte's Catholic identity, and through it the validity of his orders, based on a claim that his consecrators' heretical theology of the incarnation invalidated them. Vilatte seized the opportunity to clearly set out how Protestant Episcopalians were not doctrinally Catholic, not merely according to his personal opinion, but according to his consecrators, the Russian Orthodox and the Dutch Old Catholics. Vilatte anchors his discussion on the Thirty-Nine Articles, the core of the Dutch Old Catholic campaign to sever Vilatte's working relations with the Episcopal Church. Unlike the Anglicans, he, his consecrators and all Catholics assert the infallibility of the church and Ecumenical Councils.

They do not admit the sufficiency of Holy Scripture for Salvation, and the right of private interpretation; they deny the protestant doctrine of justification and salvation by faith alone; they abhor the acceptance of only two sacraments and repudiate the Calvinistic teaching concerning them....they repudiate as a gross misrepresentation the doctrine of

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<sup>138</sup> Vilatte, *Encyclical*, pp. 4-5.

predestination as set forth by John Calvin and his followers.<sup>139</sup>

Vilatte highlighted points of Calvinist thought in the Thirty Nine Articles.

Throughout his rebuttal of January 1893, Vilatte argued that the Episcopalians are internally inconsistent with regard to their own identity, as the broad and low church parties wrestled with the Catholic party.<sup>140</sup> He took Michaud's position that the Anglicans are a theological muddle.<sup>141</sup> This confusion between Catholicism and Calvinism meant that the Episcopalians could neither represent themselves as orthodox Catholics, nor were they in a position to judge on matters pertaining to Catholic identity.<sup>142</sup>

Vilatte saw the House of Bishops' condemnation as a continuation of Grafton's attacks against him which began shortly before his departure for Ceylon in 1891, and a mistake that would harm the cause of Catholic reform within Anglicanism, and Christian reunion.

I should have welcomed courteous and friendly relations, hoping for better times to come and for a final triumph of Catholic truth over both Calvinism

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<sup>139</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 1.

<sup>140</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, pp. 3-4.

<sup>141</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>142</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 2.

and a vain philosophy within the ranks of the Anglican Communion. This, unfortunately, has become impossible in consequence of the decidedly hostile, though utterly puerile, action of the House of Bishops in regard to the validity of my consecration.’<sup>143</sup>

Throughout his rebuttal, Vilatte compared the clarity of orthodox Catholic identity with the confusion of Catholicism and Calvinism that formed the basis of Anglican identity. It was this very confusion, he argued, that meant that while he, his consecrators, the Russian bishops, and the Dutch Old Catholics could be confident in their Catholic identity, the Protestant Episcopalians were not in a position to pass judgement on the validity of orders and the orthodoxy of others. Perhaps, he wrote, the blunders of the report and its resolutions are explained by the internal struggle between the Catholic and Calvinist parties among the Bishops, or perhaps, ‘one may charitably hope that these...were sprung upon the House when it was weary and desirous of dissolving...’<sup>144</sup> In any event, this report and its resolutions were nothing less than an embarrassment.

### **Conclusion: Carving Out an Independent Catholic Identity**

Catholic identity, for those who sought to lay claim to it, was a contested subject

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<sup>143</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, ‘An Open Answer And A Frank Statement’, *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 1.

<sup>144</sup> Vilatte, *Encyclical*, p. 6.



at the turn of the century. Roman Catholics denied that anyone other than themselves maintained a true Catholic identity, and asserted that only those who were subject to the Bishop of Rome could claim it. The Dutch Old Catholics believed that the Anglicans were Protestants, and that the claims of some of them to being Catholic were dubious at best. Anglo-Catholics like Coxe engaged with both the Roman Catholics and the Dutch Old Catholics in an effort to defend and promote their claims of being in possession of a true apostolic Catholic identity. At the time of Bishop Brown's death in 1888, Vilatte found himself trapped between two of these competing factions. His challenge was to not only distinguish the Old Catholic agenda and identity from that of the Roman Catholics, but in the face of Dutch pressure, also to distinguish between Old Catholics and Protestant Episcopalians. The Roman Catholics, he argued were sectarian, and they qualified and deformed orthodox Catholicism with the doctrinal innovations of Romanism. Vilatte's arguments against the Roman Church focussed on undermining the Romanist claims to represent the universal Catholicism of the apostolic church, and to show that true Catholicism lies within the Old Catholic movement of Europe and America, and, after 1890, within the Orthodox Churches.

Up to the point of Brown's death, Vilatte had no pressing need to emphasise the distinctions between the Independent Catholic mission and the Catholic wing of the Episcopal Church; he was after all following the example of Loyson, which he understood had the support of both churches. Prior to 1888 Vilatte seems to have

been unaware of the difference of opinion within the European Old Catholic Churches regarding their independent and collective relationships with the Anglicans. When the Dutch, who Vilatte considered to be the centre of Old Catholicism, began to lobby him against his attachment to the Episcopalians, Vilatte took their objections seriously. One faction of Old Catholics, represented by Herzog, told him that he and his mission were Episcopalians. The other, represented by the Dutch, argued that he was a true Catholic priest, and as such he could not answer to a Bishop who was in fact Protestant without endangering his own orthodoxy. Vilatte had spent four years discerning his own Catholic identity before becoming Old Catholic in 1884. The success of his mission depended on a Catholic identity and credentials that were beyond doubt. The Dutch arguments persuaded Vilatte that the mixture of Catholic and Protestant in the Anglican and Episcopal churches risked affecting the Catholicism of the American mission.

Vilatte carved out a clear Catholic identity in the face of the Roman Catholic position, which denied Catholicity to all except faithful Roman Catholics, under pressure from the Dutch Old Catholics, and finally through his published refutations of the Episcopal House of Bishops' condemnation of him and their denial of his Catholicity. This three-way pressure forced Vilatte to crystallise his own sense of his Catholic orthodoxy in a way he probably would not otherwise have done. With the publication of *A Sketch of Belief of the Old Catholics* in 1890, Vilatte set out to prove to the Dutch that he and his community not only rejected the ultramontane errors of

the Roman Catholics, but equally had not fallen under Protestant influence. He wrote in the preface that ‘...we are as far removed from Protestantism on the one hand as we are from Romanism on the other’.<sup>145</sup> Contrary to Grafton’s claim that Vilatte had ‘no fixed religious principles’ the doctrines laid out in *A Sketch of Belief* remained the consistent backbone of his Catholic identity and theology for the rest of his career.<sup>146</sup> Sometime after 1915, Vilatte published two pamphlets, *Differences Between Old Catholics and Papalists* and *Differences Between Old Catholics and Protestant Episcopalians*. Both are consistent with *Sketch of Belief*, and are best understood in light of his experiences of the period 1889-1892. Throughout *Sketch of Belief* and his 1893 rebuttal of the House of Bishops’ condemnation of him and his consecrators, Vilatte did not stray from his central aim, Catholic reform, and its ultimate goal, Catholic reunion. Catholic reform, he believed, could only be achieved with an unambiguous Catholic identity and a progressive approach to its implementation. Orthodox Catholicism, he argued, was open to all, diverse, and democratic, unlike the Roman Catholic and American Anglo-Catholic visions which were exclusive, monarchical, conformist and contrary to the progressive spirit of the American republic.

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<sup>145</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> Charles C. Grafton, ‘Statement Concerning Vilatte’, *The Diocese of Fond du Lac*, October 1898, 5-7, p. 5.

## 4: Vilatte's Ecclesial Vision, An Attempt At Re-Shaping the Church

'[W]e are as far removed from Protestantism on the one hand as we are from Romanism on the other: in a word, that we are Catholics without any other qualification.'<sup>1</sup> Vilatte understood that he needed to define not just the doctrinal distinctions of Independent Catholics from Roman Catholics and Protestants (or more accurately Anglicans), but that he also needed to show that the shape of the Church, its approach to doctrinal development, authority, and ecclesiology in an Independent Catholic model was distinct from Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Vilatte was not an academic theologian, but a missionary and campaigner; his thinking on the nature and shape of the church is neither 'systematic' nor is it presented in one or two places, but is scattered throughout the sources we now have. What is remarkable however, is how consistent his thinking appears to have been. We see elements of it in his first letters to Brown in 1885, and in writings throughout the rest of his career. Two items are of particular use for this

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<sup>1</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 3.

chapter, firstly, the *Sketch of Belief*, both the 1890 edition,<sup>2</sup> and the 1915 edition published in the May *American Old Catholic*,<sup>3</sup> in which Vilatte highlights elements of his vision of the shape of Independent Catholicism. Secondly, a short essay published in the January, 1893 edition of *The Old Catholic*, entitled 'The Church Is',<sup>4</sup> which aligns Vilatte's Independent Catholic movement with the Eastern Churches, with particular mention of the Russian Orthodox because of his relationship with Bishop Vladimir, and, developing the line of thought in the opening quote above, which distances the American Independent Catholics from both Protestant Liberalism (and Protestantism generally) and Romanism. This essay shows that, immediately after his consecration and return to the United States, Vilatte was conscious of the need to offer an ecclesial model that was distinct from both the Roman Catholic and the Anglican ones. Underpinning Vilatte's vision was the idea that the Church, a divinely established institution, was fully equipped by Christ to accomplish its goal of making all mankind Catholics. There was therefore no need to re-design it as both Protestant Liberals and Romanists had done. Doing so both deformed the shape of the Church and was contrary to Christ's design and intention, and, therefore, heretical.

The question he faced was: what did his vision of Catholic reform do to reshape the church? Vilatte approached the answer from two directions, both of which are

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<sup>2</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890.

<sup>3</sup> 'A Brief Sketch Of The Belief Of American Old-Catholics', *The American Old Catholic*, May 1915, pp. 1-6.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10.

examined in this chapter. Firstly, Vilatte sought to undermine the centralising effect of Romanism, in order to rebalance the relationships within the church between the laity and the ordained. Catholic reform, he believed, would diminish the importance of the Bishop of Rome and thus authority could be restored to the whole church, and not just be held by an ecclesiastical aristocracy. Vilatte also believed that doing so would restore what he believed to be the proper role and authority of the episcopate, and re-democratise Catholicism in accordance with his understanding of Scriptural precedent. Secondly, he argued that Independent Catholicism opposed Protestant Liberalism because, through its use of modern scholarship and philosophical trends, Protestant Liberalism diminished both doctrine and the divinely instituted sacramental offices of the Church. Vilatte worried that Protestant Liberalism diminished the activity of the divine, and broke the tie between Christ and the church. Under Protestant Liberalism, Vilatte argued, there is no divine doctrine or divine institution of the church and its offices, only human philosophical argument. Vilatte's opposition to Protestant Liberalism further contributed to distinguishing his Catholic reform model from Anglicanism, which he believed was not only infected with Calvinism but with Liberalism as well. In Vilatte's thinking, both Romanism and Protestant Liberalism had reshaped the church according to human designs and whims. Scripture, tradition and the doctrinal decisions of Ecumenical councils formed the foundation of Vilatte's understanding of the shape of the church and its mission to mankind. Vilatte wanted to show how doctrine, defined within an

Independent Catholic setting, created a broad but clearly delineated field within which to speculate, debate, and experiment without threatening orthodox Catholic identity. In his mind, Romanism, as well as Protestant sects such as Calvinism with its Westminster Confession were too prescriptive and restricted intellectual freedom. Vilatte's approach to Protestant Liberalism was that far from being too restrictive, he understood it to represent the exact opposite of Romanism and Calvinism. It taught that doctrine established by ecumenical councils is negotiable, even irrelevant; thus Vilatte believed it undermined the foundation of Catholic identity, in part in an effort to make the church more relevant or appealing to modern tastes. The Independent Catholic mission, as Vilatte understood it, was to liberate western Catholicism from Romanism, and to defend it against the equally deforming Liberalism.

### **Vilatte: Diminishing Romanism Rebalances the Shape of the Church**

Devivier, a contemporary Roman Catholic apologist, described the importance of the papacy and the centrality of the Church of Rome thus:

In fact the foundation upon which a perfect society rests can be only the supreme authority which governs it. Just as the solidity of an edifice and the adherence of all its parts, nay, its very existence, depends upon its foundation, so the ability, the unity, the very existence of the Church rests upon Peter. The

Church, therefore would not exist without Peter.<sup>5</sup>

Vilatte asserted that the Roman Church's claims to supremacy were false, and that 'the Pope holds his authority from the Church, not the Church from him.'<sup>6</sup> Rome, Vilatte argued, changed her canonical position of honour as the chair of Ecumenical Councils into universal supremacy by divine right.<sup>7</sup> Without ecumenical sanction, she altered the creed, adding the filioque, and later added the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility.<sup>8</sup> He believed that the Roman church's over-emphasis on its own importance separated it from the rest of the orthodox Catholic world and set it on a path towards heretical doctrinal innovation and to spawning additional schisms. Moreover, had Vilatte read Devivier's assertion he would have countered that the church's existence depended upon its foundation which is Christ and the Word of God.<sup>9</sup>

Upon this basic faith of Peter, this confession, this impregnable rock of ages, Jesus promises to build His Church; not upon the person of Peter, as the Papists claim, for if it had been intended for the personality of Peter, the Lord would not, in the same conversation have called him Satan for doubting his Savior's [*sic*] future sufferings. And no one is mad enough to assert that Christ

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<sup>5</sup> Devivier, *Apologetics*, p. 375.

<sup>6</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.



built his Church upon Satan.<sup>10</sup>

Christ and not Peter enabled the church to accomplish its mission.<sup>11</sup> The unity of the Church was guaranteed by the collegial activity of the universal Episcopate, and not the single-handed dictate of Peter and his successors in Rome.<sup>12</sup> The Church, Vilatte would have said, exists because Christ willed it, and because he promised that he would abide with it forever.<sup>13</sup> The Church is the organic body of believers and not an individual, or an institution.<sup>14</sup> Thus, for Vilatte as well as the wider Old Catholic and Orthodox traditions the Romanist claims shaping the church were false, and the authentic Apostolic Church of Christ was not centred on Peter or on Rome.

In order to diminish the power of Romanism, Vilatte employed three arguments against Roman Catholic claims of supremacy and the centrality of Rome. The first is that Jerusalem and not Rome is the mother of all churches. The second is that the Roman Church's claim that Christ invested Peter with supremacy over all the other Apostles is false. Finally, Vilatte argued that Peter was never the bishop of Rome. Each of these arguments will be explored in this section. Vilatte used the first two arguments as early as the first edition of *A Sketch of Belief* in 1890. Dating the latter argument is not as easy, but it appears in the pamphlet *St. Peter In Rome* published

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<sup>10</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, pp. 7, 13; Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, pp. 1-6.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10; Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10.

after Vilatte moved his base of operations to Chicago after 1900.

Vilatte argued that the See of Rome was not recognised by the rest of the Church as the preeminent apostolic See, and that Peter was never the bishop of Rome. Scripture and history, he argued, demonstrate that it was Jerusalem, and not Rome that was the mother of all churches.<sup>15</sup> Rome, 'like all the West received her illumination from eastern sources.'<sup>16</sup> Vilatte points to the account of the first Pentecost (Acts 1.4-5, 2.1-4) as evidence that all churches sprang forth from the assembly of the apostles at Jerusalem. Quoting the credal statement of Pius IV, but applying it differently he declared: 'No other church may arrogate the title of "Mother and Mistress of all the Churches"'.<sup>17</sup> If the church of Rome were indeed the historic place of origin, or centre of apostolic christianity, it could maintain a degree of precedence. Moreover, if apostolic foundation determined the primacy of historic Sees, then 'Antioch and Jerusalem should have come before either Rome or Constantinople, the latter not having been founded by an apostle at all.'<sup>18</sup> One consequence of Vilatte's re-envisioning is that the ceremonial, customs and rules of the Roman church become no more than local custom: legal, traditional, but not dominant or incumbent upon other national and regional churches. This was

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<sup>15</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> *The Old Catholic*, June 1895, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, p. 3.

important to immigrant Roman Catholics in the United States, who felt that they were being forced to conform to rites and customs alien to their own national Catholicism by the American hierarchy.<sup>19</sup>

Contrary to Roman Catholic doctrine, Christ did not grant Peter any power or authority not also shared with the rest of the Apostles. Vilatte used examples from the Gospels to demonstrate that power was not given to Peter alone, but to all of the Apostles. He began with the commissioning of the seventy-two (Lk. 10.16). 'It was not said to Peter only: Whosoever heareth thee heareth Me, and whosoever despiseth thee despiseth Me; but to *all* the Apostles: Whosoever heareth *you* heareth Me, and whosoever despiseth *you* despiseth Me.'<sup>20</sup> Vilatte emphasised the grammatical use of the plural rather than the singular in the verse, and seems to treat the account in Luke and the account in Matthew (Mt. 6.6-13; 30) as one narrative; thus, the twelve were included in the seventy-two. Vilatte cites the power to bind and to loose, a central image of the Romanist argument in favour of Peter's exceptional status. Vilatte gives precedence to the post-resurrection commissioning of the Apostles (Mt. 18.18 and Jn. 20.23) over the example of Matthew 16.19. 'When Christ gave the commission — Teach all nations; whosoever sins you forgive they are forgiven, whosoever sins you retain they are retained — he was not speaking to

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<sup>19</sup> For more on this point see chapter 6.

<sup>20</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6 (emphasis in original).

Peter in any sense different from the others.’<sup>21</sup> Vilatte interprets Peter’s confession (Mt. 16.16) as his having been at that moment an oracle of the Holy Spirit, ‘and the mouthpiece of the Apostolic College.’<sup>22</sup> Jesus congratulated Peter not for his own reasoning, but because through revelation he expressed a central doctrine — perhaps the first doctrine — of the Christian faith.

Vilatte published a pamphlet *St. Peter In Rome* in which, using only ‘proofs from the New Testament’, he sought to expose ‘the lie’ of the Roman ‘doctrine’ of Peter’s pontificate.<sup>23</sup> Jerome appears to be the source of the legend that Peter served as bishop of Rome for twenty-five years, before he was martyred there on the same day as Paul.<sup>24</sup> It was Paul, and not Peter, whom the Holy Spirit sent as Apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 2.8). ‘St. Peter’s mission, therefore, was the circumcised; and Rome was not a city of the circumcised. How then did he go and make Rome (of all cities) the place of his long residence and pontificate? Did he disobey the injunctions of the Holy Ghost?’<sup>25</sup> The Lord sent Paul to Rome to bear witness to the faith there (Acts. 18.11). If ‘Peter was already at Rome, why did the Lord specially command Paul to

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<sup>21</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph René Vilatte, *St. Peter In Rome* (Chicago, n.d.), p. 1. Though undated, the format of the pamphlet, and the photo of Vilatte suggest this was produced in Chicago sometime after 1900.

<sup>24</sup> Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 1, 5.

<sup>25</sup> *St. Peter In Rome*, n.d., p. 1.

go thither? Is it because Peter could not or did not bear witness of Him at Rome?<sup>26</sup>

Vilatte points to Paul's desire not to 'build upon another man's foundation', and concludes that if having stated this desire Paul 'still came to Rome, it was evidently because Christ had not been named there, because the Romans had not heard of Him.'<sup>27</sup> If Peter was indeed bishop of Rome at the time, then what was he doing?

Vilatte satirically compares Peter with a bored American tourist as part of his answer.

If St. Peter went to Rome (without a commission from the Lord) and resided in that city for 25 years, and yet no spiritual grace was found among the Romans, nor had Christ been spoken of there, had not so much as been named, nor had they understood or heard of Him, evidently St. Peter must have, from year's end to year's end, got up, washed, and gone to bed!<sup>28</sup>

Vilatte concludes that while both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome, it was in fact Paul that founded the church there, and not Peter.<sup>29</sup>

Devivier's bold assertion that the Church would not exist without Peter was only one example of Roman Catholic apologetics asserting the supremacy of the Church of Rome, and the Bishop of Rome over all Catholics. His book, *Christian Apologetics*:

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<sup>26</sup> *St. Peter In Rome*, n.d., p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *St. Peter In Rome*, n.d., p. 2; Rom. 15.20.

<sup>28</sup> *St. Peter In Rome*, n.d., p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, p. 2.

*A Defense of the Catholic Faith* was designed to arm Catholics with the apologetic tools to both defend the Roman position but also to persuade others to convert. It is unknown if Vilatte knew anything of Devivier or his specific work, however, he was well versed in the general shape of the Roman arguments which claimed that Scripture and history validated the Roman Church's claim to supremacy. Vilatte likewise knew that he needed to arm American Independent Catholics with apologetic arguments to undermine and counter those of the Roman Catholics. 'The Church is built upon the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the Chief Corner Stone. Peter is a foundation stone, the Prophets and Apostles are foundation stones too, but Christ is the Chief Corner Stone.'<sup>30</sup> This assertion, which Vilatte published in 1890, shifts the emphasis of the centre of the church away from one geographic See and its chief to the divine founder, Christ. It does more than merely oppose Roman claims of supremacy, it challenges the Roman understanding of who and what is the centre of the church and its activity. Vilatte, in the same argument, cites, but does not quote, Ephesians 2.20. His emphasis points to the following verses where the image of Christ as the cornerstone is expanded. 'Through him [Christ] the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred to the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.'<sup>31</sup> It is not Peter who was the centre of unity and power for the Church, as the Romanists asserted, but Christ. The churches of the east had for

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<sup>30</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Eph. 2.21-22.

centuries resisted Rome's efforts 'to stretch its privileges beyond measure'.<sup>32</sup>

Independent Catholics, therefore, must, as the Eastern churches did before, 'do something for the restoration of true Catholicism...against the aggressive demands of the popes upon Christian liberty and national churches.'<sup>33</sup> If they did so, as Vilatte urged, then just as the once powerful historical heresies like Arianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, were undermined and defeated by Orthodoxy, so too would Romanism eventually dissipate, proving once more Christ's promise that the true church would be unassailable.

Vilatte appears to have had strong commitment to lay empowerment and it was this idea which formed his response to the hierarchical model of Romanism. All baptised members of the church were equal, and as such had a right to a say and to participate in church affairs. All bishops were, by divine institution, equal in power and authority and as such bore the right (and the responsibility) to represent their flock to the whole church. All national or particular churches were equal; no one church had any authority over another. This section explores how Vilatte expressed his ideas about equality, and how he envisioned his proposed structural reforms to the church responded to the problem of Romanism.

Roman ecclesiology, as set out at Vatican I, described the Church as an unequal

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<sup>32</sup> Vilatte, *What Was Catholic Once Must Be Catholic Forever*, n.d., p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Vilatte, *What Was Catholic Once Must Be Catholic Forever*, n.d., p. 7.

society. 'It is a society of unequals, not only because among the faithful some are clerics and some are laymen, but particularly because there is in the Church the power from God whereby to some it is given to sanctify, teach and govern, and to others not.'<sup>34</sup> To believe that the membership of the church is equal was considered both 'folly' and 'absolutely contrary to the will of the divine Founder of the Church.'<sup>35</sup> Just as he used Scripture to reject Romanist claims of papal supremacy, and that the church was a monarchy, Vilatte also used Scripture, specifically Galatians 3.28, to oppose the idea that the church was, by divine institution, an unequal society. 'In Christ Jesus all distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female are abolished; for in union with Christ we are all one person.'<sup>36</sup> For Vilatte, equality did not negate the need for a 'logical order' to things. 'There must be a notional starting point or head.'<sup>37</sup> But such an order did not in any way diminish the individual baptismal rights of the faithful. Vilatte applied this baptismal equality to women, as well as to distinctions of ethnicity and race.

In 1915 Vilatte defended the Church's belief in the equality of the sexes. 'We deny that the Old Catholic Church teaches the inferiority of women.'<sup>38</sup> Vilatte anticipated an objection based on Corinthians 11.3. 'As the subordination of Christ to God the

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<sup>34</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (London: Image Books Doubleday, 1987), p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Devivier, *Apologetics*, pp. 307-8.

<sup>36</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 5.



Father in no wise prevents their perfect equality (and this is the model of man's headship over woman), it follows that the headship of man over woman argues no superiority of the former, nor inferiority on the part of the latter, but that they are in Christ on perfect equality.'<sup>39</sup> For this reason, nuns and deaconesses have an active role in religious work, and all women 'have exactly the same rights and votes as men' in the affairs of the Church.<sup>40</sup> At the time, in the United States, the campaign for universal suffrage was gaining ground. Vilatte's mention of deaconesses is tantalising and raises questions, based on his declaration, about what position he might have taken on women's ordination.

Though it did not form part of his statement on the equality of the sexes, Vilatte did not ignore the fact that Galatians mentions race as well as gender. In September, 1921 Vilatte consecrated Alexander McGuire, who is perhaps the first African-American orthodox bishop, and certainly the first African-American Independent Catholic bishop. In a letter to the civil rights campaigner W.E.B. DuBois in November 1921, Vilatte, in answer to DuBois' letter the previous month, gave the details of McGuire's consecration. McGuire, like DuBois, was a pan-Africanist. In closing, Vilatte added: 'Believe me to be ever a friend who sympathizes with you in your struggles for the rights of the colored race.'<sup>41</sup> Without diminishing the importance of

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<sup>39</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to W. E. B. du Bois, 3 Nov. 1921, p. 2.

Vilatte's progressive position, it is worth remembering that, whereas Rome opposed the idea of national churches, Vilatte promoted it, and in America, he supported ethnic churches with Polish, Swedish, Hungarian, Italian, and, with McGuire's consecration, African American bishops, representing their local church and its orthodoxy to the wider universal episcopate. He could do this because his ecclesial model was decentralised, and diminished the role and importance of the See of Rome; and so all bishops, and all particular churches, he argued were equal 'separate spiritual members of the *one* body, having one Head, Christ, and one spirit of faith and grace, expressed outwardly its oneness by unity of Creed and by communion in Prayer and Sacraments, and more especially by the gathering of its Ecumenical Councils.'<sup>42</sup>

Vilatte placed great emphasis on the role of the episcopate as a centre of order and unity for the church. 'We believe that the Episcopate is as necessary for the life of the Church as breath is for the life of man; that it is the common centre of unity and the guardian of the deposit of divine revelation'.<sup>43</sup> Having argued that Christ in no way elevated Peter above, nor set him apart from, the other Apostles, Vilatte asserted that on the day of Pentecost Christ's promise to build his church upon the rock began to be realised when 'the Seal of the Holy Spirit, and the Power, fell upon all alike, as to all alike had been given the promise of the keys of the kingdom of

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<sup>42</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 13.

heaven — the power of binding and loosing.’<sup>44</sup> All bishops ‘are equal in power and authority by divine right’.<sup>45</sup> If all of the Apostles were by divine institution equal, then so too are their successors, and all of their respective churches. No one church or bishop has the divine right to dominate the others, as none has precedence in origin over the others - the only precedence between them is that granted by the canons of the Church.<sup>46</sup>

Supreme authority over the universal church was, according to Rome, ‘vested in the Apostolic See, not by the canons, but by the Lord Jesus Himself in founding His Church...’.<sup>47</sup> Vilatte taught that, according to Scripture, no such investiture occurred, but he did not rule out the role of ecumenical canons in regulating positions within the Church. Only bishop, deacon and priest are divinely instituted orders within the church.<sup>48</sup> Minor orders and the titles of honour such as metropolitan, patriarch and pope, are all of ecclesial, and not of divine, institution.<sup>49</sup> Their prerogatives and the boundaries of their honour are established, governed, and can be altered by the ecumenical canons of the church.<sup>50</sup> Those canons, however, in fact provided no

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<sup>44</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Ryan, *Claims of A Protestant Episcopal Bishop Refuted*, p. 22. ‘The authority which the Church of Rome has received immediately from Christ resides so intrinsically in her that no Council can modify or alter it’: Devivier, *Apologetics*, p. 366.

<sup>48</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> *American Old Catholic*, Jan 1910, pp. 3, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 4.

authority for Roman patriarchal preeminence. 'The canons of the seven God-inspired ecumenical Synods grant to the Patriarch (or Pope) of Rome no exceptional prerogatives greater than those of the four other Popes...Hence the Pope of Rome has no right to the title of Head of the Church'<sup>51</sup> The Bishop of Rome, because he was the bishop of the old imperial capital, was granted the honour of chairman of ecumenical councils.<sup>52</sup> In their arrogance, 'the popes changed their simple primacy of *honor* into a primacy of *divine right* coming to them from St. Peter...From a primacy they began to claim supremacy, and then a direct jurisdiction over all bishops and their flocks.'<sup>53</sup> Roman teaching held that Christ invested Peter with sovereignty over the Church, which according to Devivier 'is the real right to govern, and includes the triple power, legislative, judiciary, and coercive.'<sup>54</sup> Vilatte, on the other hand, cited scripture and the example of the Ecumenical councils and concluded that the 'Pope of Rome is neither the source, nor the unique channel of authority in the Church of God...The Pope holds his authority from the Church, not the Church from him.'<sup>55</sup> Vilatte believed that the sovereignty of the church — the whole body of Christ — was of divine institution and therefore not subject to human alteration. The bishops of Rome had usurped the divine right of the church, and had thus caused schism and heresy. Vilatte's critique of papal supremacy was not merely a re-alignment of

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<sup>51</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Papalists*, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Devivier, *Apologetics*, p. 373.

<sup>55</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 7.

power relationships within the church, it was also about the defence of orthodox doctrine. It guaranteed that any one local or regional Catholicism could not dominate the others, reshaping the church, or hindering Christian liberty by imposing particular doctrines not defined by an Ecumenical Council.

It was not just sovereignty, but also governance, that Vilatte reclaimed from Rome for the Church. Rome insisted that the church was 'by divine right, a monarchy' ruled by the 'one supreme head who is the Pope, the Vicar of Christ'.<sup>56</sup> Cardinals, archbishops, and bishops, then, were an ecclesiastical aristocracy, leaving the laity only to obey and follow.<sup>57</sup> The church, as expressed in Vatican I, was neither democratic nor representative, only the hierarchy exercised a voice and decision-making power.<sup>58</sup> Vilatte, on the other hand, argued that Scripture and history showed that 'the government of the church is of right democratic and not monarchic'.<sup>59</sup> He cited the election of Matthias and the election of the first deacons as examples.<sup>60</sup> Vilatte insisted that congregations elect their priests, and that bishops also be elected by the church. Christ, he believed 'left the governance of His church

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<sup>56</sup> Devivier, *Apologetics*, p. 307.

<sup>57</sup> Devivier, *Apologetics*, p. 307.

<sup>58</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, p. 38.

<sup>59</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Acts 1.23-6; Acts 4.3-6; Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, pp. 5-6. It is interesting that the ideas of sovereignty and democratic governance come first in *Sketch of Belief*, before discussion of Scripture, Creeds, Councils, Orders, Marriage etc..

to the Apostles and their successors, the bishops'.<sup>61</sup> Their role was not to dictate, but to counsel and discern. Vilatte believed that the bishops' collective action, when united with Christ and the community, forged and maintained unity within the universal church.<sup>62</sup> Vilatte's reformed model not only changes the distribution of power within the church, but also eliminates the strict stratification of the church.

One effect of Vilatte's argument against papal supremacy was that he could boldly proclaim that Independent Catholics answer to Christ alone, and not to the Bishop of Rome. 'For us American Old-Catholics, deriving our mission and jurisdiction from the Holy Apostolic See of Antioch, there is no earthly infallible Pontiff superior to our country's laws and higher than these United States. Jesus only is our Infallible Head, and the Chief Shepherd and Bishop of our souls'.<sup>63</sup> In a statement that sounds both revolutionary and surprisingly Protestant, Vilatte affirms that American Old Catholics, though joined with Orthodox Catholics throughout the world are:

American, because our Catholicism does not blind us to the continual attempts to encroach upon our national liberties, laws and customs, of the arrogant papal hierarchy, which would subject us again to the intolerable yoke of Rome, which our fathers cast off at the price of martyrdom, fire and

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<sup>61</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.

sword. From the idol of the Vatican and its attendant tyranny, good Lord deliver us in our Republic!<sup>64</sup>

Both of these were printed in the May 1915 *American Old Catholic*, and, although the ideas behind them can be found in his writings as early as 1888, this is the boldest and most concentrated statement of this nature known which Vilatte made.<sup>65</sup> This effectively removed the objection many Protestants had that Roman Catholics answered to the Pope and not to Christ, and to the anxiety many Americans had that Roman Catholics were loyal to a foreign potentate, the Pope in Rome, before the United States.

Vilatte focused almost exclusively on the errors of Romanism when presenting his arguments for Catholic reform, making little mention of Protestant ecclesial models. When he called the Roman Catholic Church the 'prolific mother of innumerable sects', however, he was specifically pointing at Protestantism.<sup>66</sup> The Reformers, he argued, had tried and failed to recover orthodoxy, holding on to Romanist errors, such as the filioque, and had then developed heretical doctrines of their own.<sup>67</sup> Vilatte objected to, for example, the Calvinist doctrine of pre-destination,

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<sup>64</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> R. Vilatte, 'The Old Catholics In The United States', *The Churchman*, 11 August 1888, 183-184, p. 183; 'The Old Catholic Church', *The New York Times*, 11 September 1892, p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> Vilatte, *What Was Catholic Once Must Be Catholic Forever*, n.d., p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 4.

as well as Protestant eucharistic theology.<sup>68</sup> While Roman Catholics were heretical 'Catholics', Protestants were Christians, but so far removed from Catholicism that Vilatte believed that they simply had to convert. He believed, perhaps naively, that diminishing or eliminating Romanism would facilitate the Protestants conversion to a reformed orthodox Catholic faith.

We cannot too strongly insist on the fact that these terms [Catholicism and Romanism] are not synonymous. Quite the contrary, the one is as broad as the other is narrow, as comprehensive as the other is exclusive. The first is universal, the second local. Let this essential difference be well understood, and henceforth Romanism would lose its prestige, and Catholicism soon gather under its banner disunited Protestants.<sup>69</sup>

Vilatte appears to have believed that like Independent Catholics, Protestants rightly objected to Romanism and not necessarily to authentic Catholicism. He was not entirely alone on this point; Charles Briggs, a prominent former Presbyterian, believed that the historic episcopate and related primitive doctrines and practices would be key to a unified Christianity. Jules Ferrette (who will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter) believed that many Protestants adhered to the authentic primitive doctrine, all they lacked was apostolic orders. The possibility that a

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<sup>68</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> 'Catholicism and Romanism', *The Old Catholic*, March 1895, p. 4.



reformed Catholic ecclesiology might facilitate the conversion of Protestants and further Christian reunion gave a greater impetus to Vilatte and his campaign for Catholic reform.

Vilatte's vision of Catholic reform was structurally different from the Roman Catholic ecclesial model. The Pope was not the centre of unity, rather the universal episcopate was. The church was a democracy, not a monarchy. 'The pope holds his authority from the church not the church her authority from the pope. The Bible and church history show that the sovereignty [*sic.*] resides not in the will of any earthly chief, but in the whole church, in the will of the Christian community, and that the government of the church is of right democratic and not monarchic.'<sup>70</sup> It was a society of equals with a shared faith. By diminishing the exaggerated centrality of the papacy, Vilatte believed that Independent Catholicism restored the episcopate to its proper place and function within the church. Bishops defended the orthodox faith, and as they represented their parishes to the wider church, in Vilatte's mind, bishops were more closely linked to them, and better able to serve as points of unity within the wider church.<sup>71</sup> The laity were not subjects, bound to obey the ecclesial aristocracy, rather they had a voice, a vote, and a right to actively participate in the affairs of the church at all levels. Scripture was Vilatte's primary source to support his arguments in favour of these reforms. This emphasised Vilatte's conviction that

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<sup>70</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 4.

Independent Catholicism was a return to 'the Catholicity of Scriptural and primitive times':<sup>72</sup> that anyone wishing to become a 'complete Bible Christian'<sup>73</sup> must become Catholic and return to the teachings held by all of the original apostolic churches. In this, it appears that Vilatte was also trying to reach out to Protestants, and to encourage their conversion.

### **Vilatte Defends Orthodox Authority Against Protestant Liberalism**

Protestant Liberalism sought to utilise the results of modern thinking, science and scholarship in order to make Christianity congruent with the modern world. Doing so, however, meant diminishing the role of inspiration and revelation as a source of authority, and an anchor of Catholic identity. Vilatte believed that to diminish the roles of divine interaction and confidence in the traceable lineage of doctrine from the modern church to Christ and the Apostles, removed the timelessness of the Catholic faith, and re-designed Christianity not in accordance with Christ's intention and design, but rather in accordance with the ever changing philosophical trends of humans. Vilatte, as he did with Romanism, viewed Protestant Liberalism as another new sect. It is interesting that Vilatte reserves his criticism for Protestant Liberalism and, at least in the material currently available, appears to have nothing to say about Catholic Modernists. Unfortunately there is no

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<sup>72</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 5.

explanation for this omission. It might be the case that Vilatte did not see Catholic Modernism as a threat to orthodoxy, in part because many Catholic Modernists believed that there was a need for doctrinal reform and re-interpretation, without rejecting that which made them Roman Catholic.<sup>74</sup> This section explores how Vilatte objected to Protestant Liberalism, and how, although he championed free intellectual enquiry and debate within the Church, balanced his opposition to the methods and results of Protestant Liberalism with his vision of a progressive Orthodox Catholic ecclesial model.

Vilatte's 'An Open Answer and a Frank Statement' published in the January 1893 edition of *The Old Catholic*, as has already been discussed, was part of his refutation of the House of Bishops' condemnation of him, and of his and his consecrators' Catholicism. Intertwined in his text, Vilatte focussed on the recent consecration, on 14 October 1892, of Phillips Brooks as the Episcopalian Bishop of Massachusetts. Brooks was a prominent preacher and a Protestant Liberal. His election and consecration were controversial, opposed by some American Anglo-Catholics such as Bishops George Seymour of Springfield, Illinois and William Crosswell Doane of Albany.<sup>75</sup> Seymour, aggrieved that the 'orthodox' position did not prevail, and that

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<sup>74</sup> Alec R. Vidler, *The Church In An Age of Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 180, 185.

<sup>75</sup> 'The Fight on Bishop-Elect Brooks', *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 21 May 1891, p. 3; 'Theological Matters. Chicago Standing Committee On The Brooks Trial', *The Leavenworth Standard*, 28 May 1891, p. 1; 'Phillips Brooks Wins', *The Inter Ocean*, 13 July 1891, p. 5.

other prominent Anglo-Catholics, such as Doane, appeared to have acquiesced to the Liberals, published *An Open Letter To The Rt. Rev. William C. Doane (Bishop of Albany) In Reference To The Consecration Of The Rt. Rev. Dr. Brooks (Bishop of Massachusetts) By The Bishop Of Springfield*<sup>76</sup> in 1892 after Brooks' consecration. This book, Vilatte admits, was the source for his material criticising Protestant Liberalism in January 1893.<sup>77</sup> Vilatte's statement was a rhetorical device. The House of Bishops condemned him and his consecrators as not being Catholic; however, argued Vilatte, they can no longer claim catholicity for themselves as they have admitted one into their ranks who 'publicly repudiates as indifferent the belief of christians [*sic*] in the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity and the homoousian of the Son with the Father, who further denies the doctrine of the Church, her ministry and her sacraments'.<sup>78</sup> Vilatte does not address or critique Brooks directly, rather he used Brooks as a type through which he could criticise the Episcopalian bishops for being, as he saw it, inconsistent, and Protestant Liberalism as a trend within the Episcopal Church. Protestant Liberalism, Vilatte believed, was a danger to orthodoxy, not because of its support for scholarship and intellectual liberty, nor because of its permissiveness, but because of its indifference to central doctrines and the divinely instituted offices of

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<sup>76</sup> George F. Seymour, *An Open Letter To The Rt. Rev. William C. Doane (Bishop of Albany) In Reference To The Consecration Of The Rt. Rev. Dr. Brooks (Bishop of Massachusetts) By The Bishop Of Springfield* (Springfield, IL: The H. W. Rokker Printing House, 1892).

<sup>77</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 4.

the Church undermined Catholic identity.

Vilatte, in his criticism of the Episcopalian bishops, zeroed in on Brooks' positions on authority, doctrine, and apostolic orders. In an address which Brooks delivered as part of a Lenten series at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Boston on 23 February 1891, Brooks told his audience: 'I am anxious to-day to impress this upon you: that the Christian faith is not a dogma, it is not primarily a law, but it is a personal presence and an immediate life that is right here and now.'<sup>79</sup> Brooks taught that no doctrine of the Church was essential to Christian faith.<sup>80</sup> Doctrine, he argued, was temporary, a condition of the thinking of the moment; 'men outgrow many dogmas which they hold'<sup>81</sup> he said in the same address.

What is the Christian?...The man who makes Christ the teacher of his intelligence and the guide of his soul, the man who obeys Christ as far as he is able to understand Him. What, you say, the man who imperfectly understands Christ, who don't know anything about his divinity, who denies the great doctrines of the Church in regard to him, is he a Christian? Certainly he is my friends. There is no other test than this, the following of Jesus Christ.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Phillips Brooks' Addresses* (Boston: Charles E. Brown & Co., 1893), p. 144.

<sup>80</sup> 'The Fight on Bishop-Elect Brooks', *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 21 May 1891, p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> *Phillips Brooks' Addresses*, p. 145.

<sup>82</sup> *Phillips Brooks' Addresses*, p. 144.

Brooks' views on apostolic orders were no less troubling to Vilatte. He told his audience at the Church Congress in Philadelphia in 1890: 'I do not believe that the threefold organization of the Christian Ministry, or the existence of the Episcopate is essential to the being of a Christian Church.'<sup>83</sup> Vilatte's opinion about Brooks, shaped as it was through his reading of Seymour's book, was that Brooks' teaching, representative of the general trend of Protestant Liberalism, shifted the identification of the Church away from its divine foundation and towards a human organisational model, convenient for current intellectual trends, but heterodox all the same.<sup>84</sup>

Protestant Liberalism questioned the validity and nature of 'external authority' such as doctrine. Brooks' emphasis on the activity of living, of following Jesus, and understanding him as one is best able is an example of this. Vilatte suggested that, while this position might mark one as a good man, without doctrine, one is not distinguished as a Christian. Moreover, Vilatte believed that doctrinal indifference led to chaos and confusion. It was in part this lack of order that led him to abandon Protestantism in 1884.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, the mixture of different doctrines he observed among the sitting members of the House of Bishops supported his belief that the Episcopalians were not in a position to judge what was Catholic, or to claim

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<sup>83</sup> Seymour, *An Open Letter*, p. 95.

<sup>84</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10. It is perhaps worth noting that Seymour's own objection was that Brooks (and Protestant Liberalism) proposed 'to give us a church of his own construction': 'A Fresh Attack On Phillips Brooks', *The Indianapolis News*, 17 September 1892, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, Vilatte to Brown, 15 December 1884

catholicity for themselves.

For in an assembly, composed not only of Catholic but also of Broad and Low Churchmen, where therefore opinions and convictions range from Catholicism to Ultra-Protestantism, verging on Unitarianism, any resolution finally adopted as the opinion of the House must manifestly be so framed as to suit all parties and can therefore never be understood and accepted by a church that is purely Catholic in spirit.<sup>86</sup>

He believed that doctrine, tradition, and scripture regulated the organic body of Christ, the Church.<sup>87</sup>

Revelation — divine inspiration — was a constant theme in Vilatte's ecclesial thinking. The church was a divinely instituted society. Its ministry and sacraments were established by Christ. The Word of God was divinely inspired, including doctrinal decisions of the universal episcopate in Ecumenical councils. Vilatte made a very clear statement in favour of revelation: 'Christianity being the religion of God, fully revealed by Jesus Christ, can have no other warrant than the Word of God the Revealer.'<sup>88</sup> Vilatte's meaning is clear: without revelation there is no Catholic faith.

The incarnation is itself an act of revelation; the revelation of God's love for and

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<sup>86</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10.

<sup>88</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.

solidarity with mankind and his desire to free them. The Word of God was not just the Bible, which he described as 'inspired',<sup>89</sup> and a 'precious revelation',<sup>90</sup> but also included the apostolic tradition, and the doctrinal decisions of ecumenical councils, which 'are as inspired as the Gospels'.<sup>91</sup> 'This word is one and unchangeable. It was committed by Christ by word of mouth to the Apostles, and partly by word of mouth, and partly by writing, to the first Christians. By them it has been handed down to us from generation to generation in the Holy Scriptures and in the apostolic tradition.'<sup>92</sup> There is one Word of God, which can be traced back to Christ and the Apostles. Modernism challenged the idea of revelation. Charles Voysey, who best personifies Vilatte's description of a Liberal, for example, rejected the inspiration of Scripture, the divine authority of the Church, and the divinity of Christ.<sup>93</sup> The changed conditions of modern intellectual life led modernist theologians to replace revelation with the results of rational thought. Vilatte understood that this undermined doctrine, ecclesiology, and, most importantly, the central claim of the faith, that Jesus is the Incarnate God, and all the meaning that carried with it. For Vilatte neither modern scientific theology nor philosophy justified the Catholic faith; only the apostolic deposit, the testimony of the historical, organic experience of the

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<sup>89</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> Vilatte, *Old Catholics And Episcopalians*, p. 7.

<sup>92</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> Charles Voysey, 'The New Reformation', *The Fortnightly Review*, January 1887 (124-138), p. 125.



Body of Christ could do so.

Whereas some Protestant Liberals, such as Bishop Phillips Brooks, believed that doctrine was too restrictive and unresponsive to the Christian experience, Vilatte argued that doctrine was a necessary scaffold around which the church could build a firm foundation, and upon which the lived experience of faith could be tested and refined with confidence. Independent Catholicism, he argued, was 'not a system of philosophy which each individual has the right to interpret, but a positive doctrine based upon the constant testimony of a unique society.'<sup>94</sup> It was the Church, through the universal episcopate, that determined the canon of Scripture and defined and interpreted doctrine.<sup>95</sup>

Our Church believing dogma to be a truth contained in the Word of God, written or unwritten, accepts the dogmas of the universal Church since they are revealed truths of the Holy Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit, or truths which the Apostles received from Christ and the Holy Ghost, and handed down in the Church. The doctrine of Christ, deposited in the Early Church, is intelligibly formulated by the Seven Ecumenical Councils, and uninterruptedly taught by the Apostolic Churches of Jerusalem, Antioch,

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<sup>94</sup> J. R. Vilatte, *An Open Letter to The Rt. Rev. Dr. F. J. Kinsman, D.D., LL.D., Bishop of The Protestant Episcopal Church on His Joining The Church of Rome* (Chicago, 29 November 1919).

<sup>95</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10.

Alexandria and Constantinople.<sup>96</sup>

The ultimate source of doctrine was Christ, but it was the Church that was tasked with unpacking it from the apostolic deposit, and it was the universal episcopate which was charged with defending it. But Vilatte also wanted to reassure believers that not everything was decided by the Church, and that there was significant scope for speculation and individual interpretation. 'Where the teaching of the fathers is unanimous we may surely take their interpretation as true; where they differ each Christian is free, as long as his interpretation does not contradict some dogma of the faith.'<sup>97</sup>

Vilatte believed that doctrine was neither restrictive nor divisive, but a clear rallying point for 'the poor wanderer lost in the wilderness of unbelief, doubt, heresy and schism'<sup>98</sup> and an anchor of peace and unity for the Church.<sup>99</sup> But he also saw doctrine as liberating, because there were so few dogmas, and because believers could have confidence in their development, so that where there was no doctrine, there was room for speculation.

The dogmas of our faith are few and fixed. But the field for scientific

investigation and free opinion and for pious speculation, outside this limited

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<sup>96</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 5.

<sup>97</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Vilatte, *What Was Catholic Once Must Be Catholic Forever*, n.d., p. 6.

<sup>99</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, p. 15.

dogmatic sphere, is boundless. Thus our Catholic Apostolic Church, while safeguarding her children against error in essentials, leaves them room for the infinite play of human reason and the imagination. So then we recognize the Seven Ecumenical Councils as the basis for unity in the faith for all those who profess and call themselves Christians. In them are the ways of peace. 'Thus saith the Lord: Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls' (Jer., vii, 16).<sup>100</sup>

Freedom, including intellectual freedom, is a constant theme in Vilatte's ecclesial thinking. Believers have the right to investigate Scripture, theology, and to speculate and play with religious ideas within what he believed were the broad bounds of Catholic orthodoxy. 'Let every human being follow the light of his own conscience. For it is our absolute conviction it is only by so doing he can please the great giver of reason.'<sup>101</sup>

Was the church a divine institution or a human organisation? Vilatte answered the former. This meant that the 'authority', the source of the church's *raison d'être*, must also be tied to revelation, rather than grounded in contemporary philosophical trends. But because his understanding of the Church was as an organic, living body,

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<sup>100</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 6.

<sup>101</sup> Vilatte, *What Was Catholic Once Must Be Catholic Forever*, n.d., p. 8.

Vilatte ensured that it reflected the idea of the incarnation — God and Man together. Christ, in Vilatte's thinking, is both the revealer and the giver of reason. He therefore held that the body of revealed doctrine was just enough to bind the parts of the body (the individual churches) together, and unite them with Christ, while at the same time leaving what he described as a vast swathe open for speculation, debate, investigations and opinion. Whereas many Protestant Liberals believed that doctrine was divisive, Vilatte took the opposite view; doctrine, when properly formulated by the whole church, was a gentle guide and an essential unifying point of reference. Here we see a hint of his earlier struggle to come to terms with his own religious identity when in 1884 he finally settled on what he believed was an unambiguous progressive Catholic identity. Vilatte's underlying objection to Protestant Liberalism was that in its appropriation of human reason and intellectual liberty, it severed the link with the divine, and with those characteristics which distinguished an authentic Catholic Church from a sect or new religion.

### **Conclusion: Orthodox Catholicism Is Progressive**

Vilatte believed that his ecclesial reform restored the authentic orthodox model of the Church, which in its original design, according to Scripture and tradition, was flexible and able to evolve with the needs of societies, while at the same time effectively using newly discovered tools and methods to continue to explore and

engage with the faith as instituted by Christ and the Apostles. He rejected the heavy institutionalism of Roman Catholic ecclesiology as restrictive and heretical. Liberal Protestants, on the other hand, moved farther away from institutionalism and towards what Sabbatier called the church of the Spirit. Vilatte charted a path between them. Independent Catholicism was not a new sect, nor was it a reinvention of an existing model according to a particular philosophical outlook, rather it was an affirmation of the original Apostolic model to which, Vilatte believed, all must belong in order to realise Christ's plan that they might all be one.<sup>102</sup> The original shape of the church, he argued, was both diverse and united, and did not suffer from the doubt and confusion introduced by Romanism and later by Protestantism. Sects and divisions introduced because groups and individuals sought to redesign the church according to their ideas, all eventually passed into history, as would, he believed Romanism and Protestantism.<sup>103</sup> In Vilatte's view, the church is timeless, and Christ promised that it would withstand any assault upon its integrity. It seems that this promise, and Vilatte's confidence in it, included the divine inspiration and human reason to be vigilant, aware of defending that timeless characteristic. Vilatte believed that his ecclesial model was broad enough to be both orthodox and universal, thus in addition to eliminating heresy it laid the foundation for Christian reunion.

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<sup>102</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1890, pp. 13, 15.

<sup>103</sup> Vilatte, *What Was Catholic Once Must Be Catholic Forever*, n.d., p. 1.

## 5: Vilatte and Christian Reunion Through Catholic Reform

During the second half of the nineteenth century various formal and informal projects in Europe and the United States sought to lay the foundation for Christian reunion. Most asserted that in essential doctrines the churches agreed.<sup>1</sup> The Old Catholics in Germany, Holland, Switzerland and France, explored the possibilities of

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Schaff's summary with which he opened his speech to the Worlds Parliament of Religions in 1893 exemplifies this attitude. 'The reunion of Christendom presupposes an original union which has been marred and obstructed, but never entirely destroyed. The Church of Christ has been one from the beginning, and he has pledged to her his unbroken presence "all the days to the end of the world." The one invisible church is the soul which animates the divided visible churches....Christians differ in dogmas and theology, but agree in the fundamental articles of faith which are necessary to salvation. They are divided in church government and discipline, but all acknowledge and obey Christ as the Head of the Church and chief Shepherd of our Souls': Philip Schaff, 'The Reunion Of Christendom' in John Henry Barrows ed., *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and popular Story Of The World's First Parliament Of Religions, Held In Chicago In Connection With The Columbian Exposition of 1893*, 2 vols (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), II, 1192-1201, p. 1192. The minority report opposing the Bishops' resolution at the Episcopal Church's General Convention of 1886 is an earlier expression of the same; 'Episcopal Triennial', *The Inter Ocean*, 21 October 1886, p. 12.

uniting the Catholic churches, including, eventually, Rome.<sup>2</sup> British Protestants organised the Grindelwald conferences between 1892 and 1895.<sup>3</sup> Held, originally in Switzerland, these focussed on uniting Protestants. Jules Ferrette, in London in 1866 believed that because they shared essential doctrine, and only lacked apostolic succession, it was possible to unite British Protestants with one another, and with Catholics merely by re-instituting apostolic orders. Frederick Lee and his English circle of Anglo-Catholics, prior to embarking on their own Independent Catholic project, the Order of Corporate Reunion (OCR) in 1877, were optimistic that the means to reunite the Church of England with the church of Rome existed, if only the principals could sit down and make concessions to one another. In the United States, in 1853, William Augustus Muhlenberg proposed that the Episcopal Church ought to facilitate Protestant reunion in the United States by freely distributing apostolic succession amongst other denominations (Whether or not Ferrette was aware of the *Muhlenberg Memorial* is unknown).<sup>4</sup> At the Episcopal Church's General Convention in 1886, Dr. Hopkins of Central Pennsylvania noted that there 'has been an immense amount of yearning for Christian unity expressed in every variety of language, but not one of these various Christian bodies has said what it is willing to give up in

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<sup>2</sup> Eugène Michaud, *Proposed Programme For The Consideration Of The Old Catholics*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Oldstone-Moore, 'The Forgotten Origins of The Ecumenical Movement in England: The Grindelwald Conferences, 1892-95', *Church History* (March 2001), 73-97.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Ayers, *Evangelical Catholic Papers A Collection of Essays, Letters, and Tractates from the Writings of Rev. William Augustus Muhlenberg, D.D. During the Last Forty Years* (New York: St. Johnland Press And Stereotype Foundry, 1875), pp. 79-83.

order to secure this unity.’<sup>5</sup> The fear that such compromises could establish that one side was somehow inferior to the other discouraged such statements, in Dr.

Hopkins’ assessment. All of the formal and informal explorations of the problem acknowledged that the need for compromise, or a willingness to give up particular teachings or practices, was a very real impediment. Optimism, idealism and romantic notions of bygone golden ages, shaped and influenced many reunion schemes as much as (and in some cases more than) pragmatism.

Vilatte believed that there was no quick fix to the problem of Christian disunity. His reunion thinking was anchored in his ecclesial model; the belief that the universal Church of Christ was divinely instituted and that any redesign could introduce heretical doctrine, or qualify Catholic identity such that national and particular churches were no longer equal parts of the one body but subordinate to another. Vilatte believed that, though fractured, the Church of Christ still existed, and that Catholic reform would restore orthodoxy, thus making it possible to heal the many sectarian fractures within the one Body of Christ initiated by the Roman Church in the Great Schism of 1054. By examining one Protestant and two Independent Catholic reunion projects, this chapter will highlight distinctive elements of Vilatte’s reunion thinking and show that it was pragmatic, long term, and grounded in his doctrinal and ecclesiological model. Vilatte believed that reform and cooperation among like-minded equals would, with the help of the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Episcopal Triennial’, *The Inter Ocean*, 21 October 1886, p. 12.



bring about a restoration of Christian unity.

The chapter is divided into two main sections, each further subdivided. The first explores theoretical or idealised visions of Christian reunion that Vilatte knew about, taking as examples the Independent Catholic projects of Jules Ferrette and Frederick Lee, and the Liberal Protestant project of the World's Parliament of Religions.

Though probably neither Ferrette nor Lee would have recognised or appreciated the Independent Catholic label, they qualify to bear it, and through their friendship and working relationship their projects were intertwined. Vilatte knew both men, Ferrette only through correspondence, and Lee when he visited him in London in 1898. He did not, however, support or endorse their reunion ideas, which diverged from his own. Vilatte, though he did not openly criticise Ferrette, would have objected to his belief that reinfusing Reform churches with apostolic succession without also requiring Catholic reform would or could lead to Christian reunion. Lee's project, the OCR, was an underground movement that anticipated the demise of the Protestant element in the Church of England, which prevented reunion with the Roman Catholic Church. Vilatte, in contrast, believed that Christian reunion could not be achieved with Rome at its centre, because of Rome's doctrinal innovations, and because that would require independent Catholic churches to no longer be equals, but subjects of the Bishop of Rome.

Ferrette and Lee sought to lay the groundwork for Christian reunion along

'Catholic' lines, whereas the Rev. John Barrows and Theodore Seward's work in the 1890s, explored in the second part of the first section, envisioned a liberal Protestant formula for Christian reunion. Barrows was responsible for organising the World's Parliament of Religions (WPR), held in September 1893 as one of the congresses attached to the Columbian exposition in Chicago. Seward founded, and with Barrows promoted, the Brotherhood of Christian Unity. Vilatte had no direct personal connection to these men or their projects; however their positions and work were widely publicised at the time. The Brotherhood of Christian Unity inspired a nationwide optimism for, and interest in the possibility of, Christian reunion, and specifically Liberal Protestantism as the universal religion. Vilatte condemned the WPR as heretical; why he did so tells us a great deal about his understanding of 'the church', but also of Christian reunion.

The second section examines the real world issues and obstacles that Vilatte, and his colleagues in the church in India faced in relation to Christian reunion, namely the impact of ecclesiastical politics and sectarianism on the implementation of steps that might have otherwise progressed Catholic reform and with it Christian reunion. The Episcopal Church's House of Bishops' condemnation of both Vilatte and his consecrators in 1892, Antoni Kozłowski's failed attempt to bring his Polish Independent Catholics into union with the Episcopal Church between 1901 and 1903, and a series of exchanges in 1905 when Vilatte and his colleague in India, Mar Dionysius, found themselves blamed for impeding Christian reunion by Anglican

bodies, led Vilatte to conclude that sectarian, and ecclesiastical political interests within the European Old Catholic and Anglican churches meant that opportunities to progress Christian reunion, and Catholic reform were being overlooked, and as such neither could be relied upon as partners for the reunion project. What emerges is that, although Vilatte believed that Christian reunion would eventually come about, and would be furthered by real Catholic reform, he was more interested in the practical work of a missionary, than in abstract ideas of, and impractical schemes for, Christian reunion.

### **Reunion Is Catholic: Introduction to Jules Ferrette and Frederick Lee**

Jules Ferrette<sup>6</sup> and Frederick George Lee<sup>7</sup> worked closely together, and were close friends, despite their differing views. Ferrette sought to establish a level playing field for Protestants, so that, together with the Orthodox and Roman Catholics, Christian

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<sup>6</sup> There is very little available about Ferrette. Brandreth and Anson include brief sketches, neither of which are useful: Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, pp. 45-52; Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 31-47. Seraphim includes a chapter about Ferrette, which also explores his ties to Lee: Seraphim, *Flesh of Our Brethren*, pp. 55-112. I have chosen to rely on material found independent of these sources, namely interviews and letters published in contemporary newspapers by or about Ferrette and his activity.

<sup>7</sup> There is very little about Lee and his role as a principal organiser of the OCR. Anson includes a chapter, which is not very useful: Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 57-90. Walsh is more helpful and includes a chapter on the development of the OCR: Walter Walsh, *The Secret History of The Oxford Movement* (London: Church Association, 1899), pp. 147-161. The most useful source, aside from material found independently, has been: Mark D. Chapman, 'The Fantasy Of Reunion: The Rise And Fall Of The Association For The Promotion Of The Unity Of Christendom', *The Journal Of Ecclesiastical History*, 58 (January 2007), 49-74.

unity might be restored. Ferrette believed that the Reformed churches maintained the doctrinal and organisational basis to participate fully in reunion; all they needed was to accept the restoration of apostolic orders, reflecting, so he believed, what they already practised. Lee, in contrast, saw the low church party as the enemy persecuting the historic Catholic party and attempting to eradicate any Catholic identity within the established church; thus impeding the Church of England's reunion with the Roman Catholic Church. In 1877 he became the principal organiser of the Order of Corporate Reunion, a society of Anglo-Catholic clergy committed to preparing in private for Protestantism to burn itself out, when they would return to the public eye and restore the Catholic identity of the Church of England. Lee and Ferrette's idealism blinded them to the scathing opposition they would encounter, from both Calvinists and high church Anglicans, who respectively saw their projects as: regression into Romanist superstition; and an offence against the established Catholic principles of the Church of England. Their intertwined effort resulted in the foundation of an Independent Catholic church in Britain, as well as recruiting an unknown number of crypto-Catholic bishops and priests within the Church of England. Both men were contemporaries of Vilatte, and after his consecration in 1892 he found it necessary to respond to their activity. This section clarifies aspects of Vilatte's reunion thinking by comparing Ferrette and Lee's models of Catholic reunion with his own.

Jules Ferrette was a Frenchman consecrated in Homs, Syria on 2 June 1866 as Bishop of Iona by Mar Julius, the Future Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV.<sup>8</sup> Ferrette believed that restoring apostolic succession to British Protestants was the key to swiftly realising Christian reunion. He argued that sectarian differences were 'needless, and if a disposition [of mutual love and forbearance] could be fostered generally to resign unimportant and unessential differences for the sake of a common unity, the prospects of reconciliation would be greatly improved.'<sup>9</sup> Ferrette rejected the narrow Thirty Nine-Articles and the Westminster Confession in favour of the broader Nicene Creed.<sup>10</sup> Equally, he expressed his belief that one might be in union with the apostolic church, through valid orders, without necessarily abandoning the distinctiveness of one's particular church. The immediate problem in this, which Ferrette appears to have overlooked, was that an individual might be a 'Catholic' cleric even if his church was decidedly not.

Ferrette arrived in England in late July or early August 1866 and publicly announced his intentions in a letter written to the General Secretary of the Association for the Promotion of the Union of Christendom (APUC), George Nugee, on 18 August, and published in the *Union Review* in September.<sup>11</sup> Newspapers such

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<sup>8</sup> 'M. Jules Ferrette', *The Church Times*, 5 December 1879, p. 765.

<sup>9</sup> "'Bishop Julius, Of Iona," And His "Great Swelling Words"', *The Belfast News-Letter*, 27 November 1866, p. 4; 'The Bishop of Iona', *The Church Times*, 24 November 1866, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> 'Bishop Julius of Iona', *The Ballymena Observer*, 13 October 1866, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Bishop of Iona On Re-union', *The Union Review* (January - December 1866), pp. 552-553.

as the *Hampshire Telegraph* republished the letter, providing Ferrette with a wider audience.<sup>12</sup> It emphasised his desire to seek a common ground of worship, doctrine and ministry among the Protestant churches. He envisioned reunion in two phases; firstly, a union of the many Protestant bodies in 'liberty under the banner of that divine authority which comes in unbroken succession from the Apostles', secondly to bring them together with the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics, in an ecumenical council, and formally end the Great Schism.<sup>13</sup>

In late September, 1866, a month after his letter announcing his plan, Ferrette published a liturgy to 'promote the union of Christendom'<sup>14</sup> such that:

...an Oriental Christian, a Roman Catholic, an Anglican, or a Protestant, will be enabled to join in all the services of the Church without having to utter or hear a word to which any man believing in the Bible could object, without having their consciences perplexed by the omission of anything which any of them would deem necessary to the validity of an ordinance.<sup>15</sup>

He recognised the power of public worship to not only bring people together, but also to shape their thinking about doctrine and identity and believed that his

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<sup>12</sup> 'The Union of the Eastern and Western Churches', *Hampshire Telegraph And Sussex Chronicle*, 22 September 1866, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Bishop of Iona On Re-union', *The Union Review* (January - December 1866), 552-553, p. 553.

<sup>14</sup> From the preface; Jules Ferrette, *The Eastern Liturgy Of The Holy Catholic, Apostolic, And Orthodox Church, Simplified And Adapted For Use In The West* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., 1866).

<sup>15</sup> 'The Bishop of Iona On Re-union', *The Union Review*, p. 552.

reformed liturgy would demonstrate that the various denominations were not as different as they believed. Ferrette declared that he was 'ready to give Holy Orders to pious and learned men who, being duly elected, will declare themselves willing to conform to this Liturgy.'<sup>16</sup>

Apostolic orders would bind the disparate sects together, while preserving their distinctiveness, or so Ferrette believed. The liberty under which one operated as a minister with apostolic succession meant that his ordination of those men who sought it, 'shall never be constructed as an abjuration of their former faith. They shall never be asked by me to hate or despise the mother Church by which they have been prepared for the service of the Holy Catholic, Apostolic and Orthodox Church of the West.'<sup>17</sup> Ferrette told an assembly on 20 November, that in order to advance the cause of reunion, 'he would confer upon English clergymen (conditionally, if desired) orders of the same rank as they already possessed, in case any felt doubts upon the matter.'<sup>18</sup> This appears to be an expansion of his original plan, and may in fact be a result of his friendship with Nugee, Lee, and their circle. At the same meeting Ferrette also stated that he would 'consecrate Bishops for any orthodox community that might wish for them', thus beginning the process of not only restoring the collapsed historic episcopate, but also uniting the various Christian bodies.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Ferrette admitted that he intended to found a church, 'probably a

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<sup>16</sup> Ferrette, *Eastern Liturgy*, preface.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Bishop of Iona On Re-union', *The Union Review*, p. 553.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Bishop of Iona', *The Church Times*, 24 November 1866, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> 'The Bishop of Iona', *The Church Times*, 24 November 1866, p. 1.

very small one, and with only half-a-dozen Bishops — in order to perpetuate in the West the oriental succession'.<sup>20</sup> According to his plan, Anglicans, whose orders were questionable, could have them reinforced and confirmed; Dissenters could have the historic episcopate restored; and those who wanted to take a more active role, promoting not only Orthodoxy but Christian reunion, could join him directly. He believed that most churches were nearly ready for reunion; all they needed was to see this for themselves, and accept the offer of the restoration of apostolic succession. With love and forbearance, he thought, reunion was not only a plan worth fighting for, it was within reach.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, his English audience did not show the love and forbearance for his plan that he might have hoped for. H. P. Wright, Chaplain to the Forces, replied to Ferrette's letter announcing his plan on 27 September 1866 and declared that, far from cultivating Christian reunion, Ferrette's plan would sow disturbance rather than unity, thus, though honourable in its intentions, the 'mission of Julius, Bishop of Iona...must prove a melancholy failure.'<sup>22</sup> Ferrette was an idealist. Few others, however, subscribed to his idealistic vision. After a long, hard year of abuse and controversy in the British press, Ferrette abandoned Britain for the United States, and later returned to Switzerland, where he focussed on Orthodox theology. Ferrette failed to recognise that the doctrinal divisions and historic enmities between the

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<sup>20</sup> 'The Bishop of Iona', *The Church Times*, 24 November 1866, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Bishop of Iona', *The Church Times*, 24 November 1866, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> 'Bishop Julius And Union of the Anglican and Eastern Churches', *Hampshire Telegraph*, 29 September 1866, p. 8.



various churches were such that, in practice, peace, love, forbearance and a non-offensive liturgy could not quickly achieve Christian reunion. The Anglo-Catholics were offended that Ferrette, along with Lee, Nugee, and others, would dare to undermine belief in the validity of the Church of England; the Orthodox, both Byzantine and Oriental, laughed at his idea that a liturgy might be crafted so as to not alienate any churchman, and questioned the irregularity of his consecration; Protestants took umbrage at the desire to impose a liturgy and reinstate the apostolic succession that they perceived as superstition.

Ferrette claimed to have been grappling with the problem of Christian reunion from his youth and he pursued it as his principal goal. Vilatte made no such declaration. Given his experiences between leaving the Roman Catholic seminary in 1880 and his ordination as an Old Catholic priest in 1885, however, at least some of Vilatte's reunion thinking must have taken shape as he experienced the discord within Protestant sects in the United States. Rather than make the pursuit of reunion the cornerstone of his mission, as did Ferrette, Vilatte emphasised that the liberty of Independent Catholicism (Orthodoxy) through adherence to apostolic doctrine could facilitate reunion. The line in the Nicene creed, 'one holy catholic and apostolic church' may have played a role in Vilatte's attitude that reunion would be a product of wider adherence to apostolic doctrine. Reunion for him was a good thing, a desirable thing, something all believers should contribute to realising, but they

would do so through their evangelising for the Independent Catholic cause, and, where possible, through collaboration with other Catholic Churches, which were principally ends in themselves, rather than a means to achieve reunion.

Ferrette argued that, because the Eastern Churches never altered their doctrine, it was more primitive, and as such free of the later accretions of sectarian and national particularities. The Westminster Confession and the Thirty Nine Articles, for example, were prescriptive, narrow, and tied to individual national cultures, making reunion on such terms difficult for Christians with a different national or sectarian culture. Vilatte shared Ferrette's belief that it was only on the broad basis of the Eastern Churches that reunion might be realised. However, that was as far as their agreement stretched. Unlike Ferrette, Vilatte believed that the differences between different sects were substantive, and had begun in 1054 when Rome severed itself from the rest of the church by attempting to impose new doctrine on all Catholics. Catholic reform, a renewal of the substance of apostolic doctrine, was in Vilatte's mind the only way to realise Christian reunion. When Catholic churches reformed their doctrine, removing those accretions that artificially qualified Catholic identity, then Protestants would, he thought, willingly return to the universal Catholic Church. Though this view was somewhat naive, Vilatte tapped into a thread of Protestant thinking that the addition of erroneous teaching and superstitious practices was what made the Church of Rome heretical. Remove those heretical accretions, he reasoned, and reunion becomes a possibility.

Ferrette, before he departed Britain for the United States in March 1867, was willing to ordain any Protestant minister and allow them to continue in their denomination, without the need to abjure any of its particular doctrines.<sup>23</sup> Ferrette's position appears to treat apostolic orders as a talisman that would somehow bind doctrinally divergent communities together without them engaging with the very issues that divided them. He does not appear to have appreciated that overlaying apostolic orders onto existing systems which were intrinsically opposed to such orders was doomed to fail. Vilatte, in contrast, because his reunion thinking hinged upon everyone being Catholic, refused to ordain anyone who would not become Independent Catholic. He recognised that success depended on a change of allegiance and belief from a non-Catholic sect to what he saw as orthodox Catholicism. Unlike Ferrette, Vilatte could not separate the value of apostolic orders from the content of apostolic doctrine and praxis. He believed that practical solutions in the mission field, Catholic collaboration and doctrinal reform were essential elements of any successful effort at reuniting Christians in one universal church. While he did not object to local churches holding locally relevant or developed teaching, he did, however, qualify his position by insisting that such opinions could not contradict apostolic doctrine, nor could individual churches be allowed to impose them on others. Here again, Vilatte's approach differed from Ferrette's, because he recognised that in order for reunion to be realised and

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<sup>23</sup> Julius Ferrette, 'M. Julius Ferrette', *The Church Times*, 3 October 1879, p. 606.

authoritative, it must have an agreed doctrinal basis, and not just apostolic orders and good will.

Ferrette, because he had so minimised the importance of sectarian differences, did not have a Catholic reform agenda, but focussed entirely on the tangible act of reunion through common worship and a common apostolic lineage. Both Ferrette and Vilatte shared a belief in the importance of apostolic orders. However, where Ferrette believed that Reformed churches such as the Presbyterians were doctrinally and ecclesially organised along apostolic lines, but without the historic episcopate, Vilatte believed that Protestants had deviated doctrinally too far from an orthodox identity and must therefore convert. Similarly, though Vilatte reported that he was inundated with requests to do so, he refused to validate the orders of Anglican clergy; they too would first need to commit to Catholic reform, and become declared Independent Catholics. Vilatte did not require conformity to a particular liturgy — any traditional orthodox liturgy was acceptable to him — as long as it was the liturgy of the people, and in a language they understood. These differences are partially attributable to their respective projects. Vilatte campaigned for a broader programme of Catholic reform and progressive approaches to ministry. Ferrette on the other hand, though he had experience in mission under exceptional circumstances, was single mindedly focussed on the problem of Christian reunion. He was not alone; Frederick Lee, who along with de Lisle and Nugee founded APUC, may have been inspired by Ferrette's example. In 1877 Lee founded the OCR,

which aimed to reunite the Anglican Church with the Church of Rome through the clandestine acquisition of valid apostolic orders by Anglican clergy.

Willibald Beyschlag, in 1898, commented that, though negotiations were ongoing between the Old Catholics and the English Church, he did not believe that they would progress because ‘there are among the Anglicans those who emphatically desire to be “Catholic,” and are at the same time wholly out of sympathy with the Old Catholics. The English Ritualists are on the way *to* Rome; the Old Catholics on the way *from* Rome.’<sup>24</sup> Beyschlag had in mind the efforts of people such as Frederick George Lee (1832-1902) the vicar of All Saints church in Lambeth. Lee, along with George Nugee, the vicar of Wymernig, Thomas Mossman, the vicar of West Torrington, Dr. John Seccombe, and Ambrose Philips de Lisle, a convert to Roman Catholicism, campaigned for the reunion of the Church of England with the Church of Rome. Lee and his circle believed that reuniting the Church of England with Rome would lead the way for unification across Europe. They believed that Protestant or ‘Puritan’ influence was waning, making Protestants more radical in openly oppressing the Catholic branch of the Church of England through, for example, the passage of the Public Worship Regulation Act in 1874, and the Folkstone trial in 1876. They also believed that the Catholic revival in England signalled that the time was right to act. Lee and his associates organised the OCR, a secretive movement within

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<sup>24</sup> Willibald Beyschlag, ‘The Origin and Development of The Old Catholic Movement’, *The American Journal of Theology* (July, 1898), 481-526 (p. 523).

the Church of England that aimed to privately prepare the way for the day when the Protestants might be vanquished, and reunification with Rome finally realised. Even though he was received into the Roman Catholic Church weeks before his death in January 1902, Lee's published work promoted corporate reunion with Rome, rather than individual personal conversion to the Roman Catholic Church. This point, perhaps above all others, framed Lee's intentions for his later organisation of the OCR in 1877.

The organisers of the OCR identified a number of defects within the Church of England, to which they attribute their inspiration to act. Two of these, 'uncertainty of sacramental states'; and 'want of unquestioned episcopal succession', were intertwined with one another, and of particular importance to Lee and the other members of the OCR, as they lay at the heart of their anxiety surrounding their hope for the established Church's eventual reunion with Rome.<sup>25</sup> Lee and the other organisers of the OCR accused the low church party of 'drying up what sap, if any, remains in the branch of a spiritual tree long since visibly severed from its parent trunk' through their contempt for apostolic ministry.<sup>26</sup> Low churchmen, he claimed, were so careless in the administration of, for example, baptism, that one could not be certain that the water was blessed, or even touched the candidate, and as baptism was generally done in infancy, no-one could be certain if they were in fact

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<sup>25</sup> 'The Existing Confusion', *The York Herald*, 28 May 1878, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick G. Lee, 'The Order of Corporate Reunion', *The Nineteenth Century*, November 1881, 744-762, p. 751.

Christian.<sup>27</sup> Lee followed this line of thought to orders. If a bishop was not baptised, then he was not a bishop and could not therefore pass on valid apostolic orders, even though the Church theoretically maintained valid orders. 'It of course becomes quite vain to attempt to defend Anglican orders with success, when such examples of negligence and contempt for Christ's ordinance are so readily forthcoming. Such negligence cuts the ground from under one's feet, rendering every act in the work of ordination uncertain.'<sup>28</sup> This was an attack on the low church party; Lee blamed them for degrading and corrupting the Catholicity of the established church.

The OCR solution was to make their Catholic practice private. In this way, they were able to freely practice historic Christianity according to orthodox doctrine without fear of persecution from Calvinists and secularists. Organising as a private network allowed them to publicly maintain their fidelity to the state and the established church.<sup>29</sup> What is more, the bishops of the Church of England, having surrendered 'all canonical authority and jurisdiction in the spiritual order, can neither interfere with, nor restrain us in our work of recovering from elsewhere that which has been forfeited or lost,' namely independent apostolic orders from a fresh source.<sup>30</sup> Members of the OCR required undoubted apostolic orders in order to carry

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<sup>27</sup> Frederick G. Lee, 'The Order of Corporate Reunion', *The Nineteenth Century*, November 1881, 744-762, pp. 749-753.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick G. Lee, 'The Order of Corporate Reunion', *The Nineteenth Century*, November 1881, 744-762, p. 754.

<sup>29</sup> Frederick G. Lee, 'Our Duty As Churchmen And Citizens', *The Morning Post*, 21 June 1877, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Walsh, *Secret History*, pp. 150-151.

out their work. That they acquired them is, curiously, unquestioned. How they did so, and, officially at least, who was consecrated and by whom, remains shrouded in mystery. Based on Lee's published letters to the *Morning Post*, it is likely that the consecrations took place between 14 May and 14 June 1877. The OCR held its first synod in London between 3 and 4 July 1877.<sup>31</sup> On 8 September 1877, when the OCR published a 'pastoral' letter, three bishops were listed pseudonymously at its head but not publicly identified: Thomas, Pro-Provincial of Canterbury, Joseph, Provincial of York, and Laurence, Provincial of Caerleon.<sup>32</sup>

Lee's approach to reunion began in the 1850s in the same vein as earlier English high churchmen, such as Wix. He believed that the Church of England's reunion with Rome was desirable and possible if both sides (and in particular Rome) were willing to make reasonable concessions to the other. After the passage of the Public Worship Regulation Act in 1874, Lee and the other members of the OCR decided that in order to re-build the Catholic identity of the English Church, and thus protect what they believed to be the obvious future outcome, its reunion with Rome, it was necessary to acquire non-Anglican apostolic succession, and to go underground.<sup>33</sup> They did this because, as Lee explained in 1877, they refused to be cast out of the

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<sup>31</sup> 'The Order Of Corporate Reunion', *The Morning Post*, 5 July 1877, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Order Of Corporate Reunion', *The Morning Post*, 7 September 1877, p. 2; Walsh, *Secret History*, p. 149.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Catholics And The "Order Of Corporate Reunion"', *The Staffordshire Daily Sentinel*, 9 October 1878, p. 4.



national church, but they also believed that they had a higher duty to defend the universal church.<sup>34</sup>

Vilatte, however, opposed Lee's belief that the Pope was the universal head of the Catholic faith, and the natural centre for Christian reunion. 'We also believe that since 1054, the Roman church and that heretical [*sic*] pope cannot be a centre of christian [*sic*] unity and that one must seek the religious unity without the papacy to obtain the liberty in Christ.'<sup>35</sup> Despite occasional personal lapses into unfounded optimism, Vilatte knew that Rome would make no concessions, and that the Vatican would expect nothing short of full submission. Any return to Rome would legitimise Rome's claim to universal supremacy and its heretical doctrines. Moreover, from his point of view, because they were already orthodox, true Catholics could not reasonably justify making any concessions to Rome without also surrendering one or more essential elements of apostolic doctrine. Submission was also not an option because it would suggest that national Catholic churches were somehow unequal or inferior to Rome. For Vilatte, Catholic churches collaborating with one another would diminish the power of Rome, and, he hoped, would eventually draw both Protestants and Rome back into full Catholic orthodoxy.

Lee extolled the virtue of the union of the church and state, and saw it as an

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<sup>34</sup> Frederick G. Lee, 'Our Duties As Churchmen And Citizens', *Morning Post*, 15 May 1877, p. 5; Frederick G. Lee, 'Our Duties As Churchmen And Citizens', *Morning Post*, 21 June 1877, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> 'Letter to A Divine of England', *The Old Catholic*, March 1895, p. 2. Was the 'Divine' Lee?

important feature of the corporate reunion of the Church of England with Rome. However, he believed that politicians and Protestants had degraded the Church of England and the authority of her clergy, necessitating the organisation of the OCR. Lee disapproved of individual clergy and laity converting to Roman Catholicism,<sup>36</sup> even though he himself would convert shortly before his death in 1902.<sup>37</sup> Vilatte, however, described the union of Church and state as 'spiritual adultery' and he believed the separation of Church and State essential if reunion were to be realised.<sup>38</sup> 'If really one desired the union of the churches the first thing required is a complete separation of church and state, and from all political entanglements.'<sup>39</sup> Though Vilatte's issue in this statement was the influence of foreign states in America through national churches such as Rome and Canterbury,<sup>40</sup> he also believed that the interests of a given state interfered with a church's ability to be an honest representative of apostolic doctrine before other churches, even in its own territory, because it introduced a divided loyalty, which could qualify Catholic identity, or result in the particular ideas and practices of a national church being imposed on other national churches.

Lee appears to have had no plan for persuading Protestants to participate in

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<sup>36</sup> Frederick G. Lee, 'Our Duties As Churchmen And Citizens', *Morning Post*, 21 June 1877, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Chapman, 'The Fantasy Of Reunion', p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> Vilatte, *Sketch of Belief* 1915, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Vilatte, *Open Letter to Kinsman*.

<sup>40</sup> Vilatte, *Open Letter to Kinsman*.

Christian reunion. He believed that they were a spent force, and they knew it, and had therefore turned to oppressing true churchmen by means of the powers of the State. Protestantism, he believed, would eventually burn out, allowing the true believers and their hidden priests and bishops within the OCR to re-emerge into the public eye and facilitate a renewal of Catholic life in Britain; a renewal which would include reunion with the Church of Rome. Vilatte, on the other hand, saw Protestants not as the enemy, but as people of faith and good will who were nevertheless schismatic and even heretical. He believed that Protestantism had emerged as an honest but failed attempt at recovering orthodoxy from Rome. Although he shared Lee's anxiety about Protestant Liberalism eroding Catholic doctrine, Vilatte's objection rested not on the premise that Protestant Liberals were reactionaries and oppressing Catholics, but that their theology pushed Christians farther apart, making a restoration of Christian unity all the more difficult.

Vilatte met Lee while staying in London in the summer of 1898. He was aware of the OCR as early as 1889 when Wormhout wrote to him that all Catholics doubted Anglican orders and '[s]ome of her own members, both lay and clerical participate in this doubt, and have in England banded themselves into a society known as *The Order of Corporate Reunion*.'<sup>41</sup> By the time of his own consecration in 1892 it is clear the Vilatte felt that the OCR was not making a positive contribution to the cause of Christian reunion. When, in 1893, Vilatte criticised Edward Knowles, whom he had

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<sup>41</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, pp. 5-6 (emphasis in original).

ordained the previous year, for pressuring Vilatte to consecrate him, Vilatte suggested that 'he may possibly apply to the Corporate Reunion, which is said to be less particular.'<sup>42</sup> Vilatte's negative opinion of the OCR at that time was probably coloured by the fact that in a little over a month after his return to the United States he had already received five requests from Episcopalian clergy asking him to consecrate them.<sup>43</sup> He was soon inundated with similar requests. 'Since my return to America I have been pestered with applications from ministers of other churches for Episcopal consecration.'<sup>44</sup> Vilatte refused them all. Based on his response to Knowles, it appears that he blamed the OCR and its practice of secretly ordaining and consecrating individual Anglican clergymen for encouraging these requests for consecration. Vilatte was happy to cooperate with other Catholic churches, especially if it progressed the cause of Christian reunion. But he always worked on the basis that the men that he ordained would be public orthodox Catholics, converts working for the cause of Catholic reform.

Lee's approach was to go underground and wait. Ferrette sought to seed reunion by openly infusing Reformed churches with apostolic succession which they did not want. Vilatte, on the other hand, believed that it was the duty of all believers, and especially church leaders, within those churches claiming apostolic succession to actively and publicly participate in the ongoing dialogue, and, where possible, in

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<sup>42</sup> 'Reply to the "Living Church"', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, 5-7, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> 'Reply to the "Living Church"', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, 5-7, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> 'Wrong Impressions. Bishop Vilatte Seeks to Set Them Right by Explaining Certain Matters', *Green Bay Press Gazette*, 23 September 1892, p. 2.

cooperative efforts in the mission field to lay the groundwork for Christian reunion. Examining the stories of Ferrette and Lee allows us to compare their Independent Catholic reunion projects and ideas with Vilatte's. From the comparison, it appears that his thinking, although still in some ways over optimistic — for example his hopes for the conversion of Protestants — was organic, pragmatic, and far more realistic than that of either Ferrette or Lee and the OCR.

### **Reunion Is Protestant: The World's Parliament of Religions and The Brotherhood of Christian Unity**

The World's Parliament of Religions, a seventeen day congress organised as part of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, promoted the idea of worldwide progress towards an universal religion - namely the liberal Protestantism of its organising committee, led by the Rev. John Barrows.<sup>45</sup> The Brotherhood of Christian

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<sup>45</sup> The material I found most helpful for the following section includes, the two volume account of the history and presentations at the WPR: Barrows, John Henry, ed., *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and popular Story Of The World's First Parliament Of Religions, Held In Chicago In Connection With The Columbian Exposition of 1893*, 2 vols (Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893); Feldman, Egal, 'American Ecumenicism: Chicago's World's Parliament of Religions of 1893', *Journal of Church and State* (Spring 1967), 180-199; Kittelstrom, Amy, 'The International Social Turn: Unity and Brotherhood at the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893', *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 19 (Summer 2009), 243-274. Parra's thesis offers interesting insight into Roman Catholic involvement with and attitudes about the event: Parra, Carlos Hugo, 'Standing With Unfamiliar Company on Uncommon Ground: The Catholic Church And The Chicago Parliaments of Religions' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2012).

Unity, organised by Theodore Seward in 1891, was a direct byproduct of Barrows' vision for the WPR, and intimately tied to it during the event in September 1893. The WPR and the Brotherhood of Christian Unity promoted both religion as a means of improving the life and work of the people and Christian reunion. Though Vilatte supported the social justice and reunion aims of both the parliament and the Brotherhood of Christian Unity, he objected to the parliament, condemning it as heretical two months after it closed in December 1893. Vilatte's commitment to Christian reunion as a Catholic project meant that he naturally opposed the Protestantising vision of John Barrows and Theodore Seward. Vilatte believed that embracing Protestantism must take the Church farther away from the divinely instituted ecclesiastical and dogmatic unity of orthodox Catholicism.

Christian reunion was in Barrows' thinking a stepping stone to worldwide religious union, and the emergence of a perfect world religion. 'We believe', he told an assembly in New York the year before the Parliament opened, 'that Christianity is to supplant all other religions, because it contains all the truth there is in them and much besides, revealing a redeeming God.'<sup>46</sup> Supporting messages from Protestant ministers across the United States echoed the sentiment, including one from Bishop Charles Grafton, who wrote to Barrows that 'civilisation which is making the whole world one, is preparing the way for the reunion of all the world's religions in their true centre — Jesus Christ.'<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, vol. 1, p. 28.

<sup>47</sup> Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, vol. 1, p. 25.

Seward, Barrows and other liberal Protestant churchmen believed that, although the churches talked and theorised about reunion, their sectarianism had proved an impassible barrier.<sup>48</sup> Seward in fact believed that it was the churches' sectarianism that drove people from religion into irreligion.<sup>49</sup> His solution was to cultivate unity among Christians, despite the individual denominations.<sup>50</sup> Many American Protestants had already abandoned historic doctrines.<sup>51</sup> Seward was committed to the idea of uniting people under the banner of 'Christ above creed'.<sup>52</sup> His membership formula took advantage of both: 'For the purpose of uniting with all who desire to serve God and their fellow men under the inspiration of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ I hereby enrolled myself as a member of the Brotherhood of Christian Unity.'<sup>53</sup> Vilatte shared Barrows and Seward's belief that sectarianism drove people into irreligion and indifference. However, just as he objected to the exclusive, sectarian, doctrinal additions of the Roman Catholics, Vilatte also objected to the Protestant trend toward abandoning apostolic doctrine, and thus eroding universal Christian identity, in the name of Christian reunion.

The WPR cultivated and built momentum for an optimism that the world was

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<sup>48</sup> Feldman, 'American Ecumenicism', p. 193.

<sup>49</sup> 'A Universal Religion', *St. Joseph Weekly Herald*, 23 February 1893, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> 'For Christian Unity', *Democrat and Chronicle*, 1 July 1895, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Kittelstrom, 'The International Social Turn', p. 246. Vilatte, as has already been discussed, noticed this trend: 'An Open Letter and Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, pp. 1-5.

<sup>52</sup> 'For Christian Unity', *Democrat and Chronicle*, 1 July 1895, p. 8; 'A Universal Religion', *St. Joseph Weekly Herald*, 23 February 1893, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> 'Enroll in Christian Unity', *The Chicago Tribune*, 22 September 1893, p. 9.

becoming closer, more united, and that a world-wide unifying religion was possible. Vilatte shared in the optimism of unity, brotherhood, and growing equality and democracy, but he opposed the WPR. He was not the only Christian leader to criticise or condemn it: the Archbishop of Canterbury sent a terse refusal to attend to the organisers,<sup>54</sup> and Barrows' own denomination, the Presbyterians, hastily passed a resolution condemning it.<sup>55</sup> Vilatte expressed his opposition to the WPR in the context of his published defence of his consecration *An Encyclical To All Bishops Claiming To Be Of The apostolic succession*. 'Syrian Jacobite succession is admitted by all the Churches, Latin, greek, Copt, Armenian and Old Catholic. To prove this, is like trying to prove that the earth moves, or to disprove that Anglicans fraternize with every kind of heretic, both Oriental and Occidental. Vide Grindelwald, the Evangelical Alliance, and the Parliament of Religions.'<sup>56</sup> It is, therefore, necessary to ask whether his objection was grounded in his anger at the Protestant Episcopal Church's House of Bishops, or in his own positive ideas about ecclesiology, theology and, more importantly in this context, Christian reunion. To discount purely polemical purposes, then we need to look for what it was about the WPR platform that caused Vilatte to decry it as heretical.

The earlier, extended edition of his defence against the House of Bishops'

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<sup>54</sup> Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>55</sup> Parra, 'Standing With Unfamiliar Company on Uncommon Ground', p. 34.

<sup>56</sup> Vilatte, *Encyclical To All Bishops*, p. 3; on Grindelwald Conferences, Christopher Oldstone-Moore, 'The Forgotten Origins Of The Ecumenical Movement In England', pp. 73-97. On the Evangelical Alliance and its links to the organisers of the WPR: Kittelstrom, 'The International Social Turn', p. 249.



judgement, published in January 1893 provides the answer. In that edition, he interjects the themes and ideas that explain his objection to the parliament, principally that the foundation for authentic reunion already exists. Creating new structures and in so doing accommodating 'an indifferent toleration of heterodox opinions' taints orthodoxy, and leads to confusion.<sup>57</sup> Vilatte's objection to the parliament parallels his objection to the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops, and by extension to Anglicanism as a whole. The House of Bishops, he argued, was 'an assembly composed not only of Catholic but also of Broad and Low Churchmen, where, therefore, opinions and convictions range from Catholicism to Ultra-Protestantism, verging on Unitarianism'; it therefore could not be expected to make clear, authoritative judgements, because every resolution was a compromise 'framed as to suit all parties and can therefore, never be understood as accepted by a church that is purely Catholic in spirit.'<sup>58</sup> Although this was stated in a polemical context, we can be confident that Vilatte's later condemnation of the WPR was mainly rooted in his broader theological reflection about Christian reunion, and not his anger around that time at the Protestant Episcopal Church's House of Bishops.

Vilatte shared Barrows' belief that Christianity was the natural universal religion, but for Vilatte that Christianity was not Protestant, but orthodox Catholic. Although the organisers of the WPR were well intentioned, Vilatte believed that they impeded

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<sup>57</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 3.

true Christian reunion by ignoring a key element in the process.

It is evident...That men believing that the grace of God always abides in the true Church and wishing to escape from the Babylonian confusion of Romanism and Sectarianism must not try to establish something new for a basis of so-called 'Church Unity,' but remembering that Christ has built His Church once for all, and that no man can lay other foundation than that is laid, they will seek the faith in its original purity, unadulterated by Roman or Sectarian addition and error.<sup>59</sup>

Vilatte's ecclesiology was clear - the church is God's ministry to man, it is divinely instituted and divinely inspired; the church is not man's ministry to himself, or to God: it is not our creation. The WPR (and the Anglicans) were Protestant, and worked from that position. Catholic reform would, Vilatte believed, remove the sectarian and heretical features which had been accumulating within the true universal church of Christ since the Roman Catholic schism of 1054. The one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic church would once again be all encompassing and 'gather under its banner disunited Protestants. Christian union which is so desirable would then readily be accomplished upon solid foundations, upon the rock of ages, which is the Catholic faith.'<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> 'The Church Is', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> 'Catholicism and Romanism', *The Old Catholic*, March 1895, p. 4.

## Vilatte And The Politics of Christian Reunion

Many of those engaged in exploring Christian reunion at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries recognised that no one church ought to be in a position to dominate or assimilate the others. There was a recognition that reunion meant unity, but not conformity. Vilatte's ecclesial model, which began as a defence of authentic Catholicism against Romanism, held that all independent Catholic churches, because of their shared doctrinal foundation and the universal episcopate, were equal. Each church, because of its historic or national particularities contributed to the whole body, the One Church of Christ. Though this aspect of his ecclesiastical model is explicit, Vilatte did not explain that this idea underpinned his reunion thinking. That Vilatte subscribed to this view, however, meant that he agreed with those participating in the wider reunion debate on the basis of unity not conformity. Between 1893 and 1905, a series of events found Vilatte and his Indian colleague, Mar Dionysius, defending themselves against what they perceived to be Anglican attempts to assimilate the Church in India. Vilatte's correspondence with Dionysius show that he linked the situation with another, seemingly disconnected, event; the failed attempt by Bishop Kozlowski to unite his Polish Old catholics with the Protestant Episcopal Church between 1901 and 1903, which in effect, facilitated the Episcopal Church 'consuming' an Independent Catholic body. By the time that Vilatte wrote his open letter to Kinsman in 1919 he had concluded that neither the

Roman Catholic nor the Anglican churches could be relied upon to further the cause of Christian reunion, because he believed that both churches refused to undertake Catholic reform, and sought to dominate other Catholic churches; in so doing both churches set up barriers to realising Christian reunion. Though he held this position in relation to the Church of Rome from as early as 1884, he held out hope that the Anglicans, along with the European Old Catholics and the Orthodox, could together press ahead with Catholic reform and Christian reunion. This section traces the events that led Vilatte to change his mind in relation to the Anglicans, and to some extent also the European Old Catholics. Four matters provide essential context here: Vilatte and Coxe's effort to heal the rift between his Independent Catholics and the Episcopal Church caused by the controversy over Vilatte's consecration; Antoni Kozłowski's consecration in 1897 and appeal to the House of Bishops' for his Polish Old Catholics to be admitted to communion between 1901 and 1903; E. M. Philip's letters to *The Church Times* in 1904 appealing to the Church of England to stop its Evangelical missionaries from interfering in the affairs of the Syrian Church in India; and the response to Philip of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). These four matters have historically been treated in isolation, if at all. Vilatte's correspondence with Mar Dionysius however, shows that, in his mind, they were connected.

In the United States, within those circles of the Episcopal Church interested in Christian reunion at the turn of the century, the belief was that the Episcopal Church

itself was the natural anchor point for the reunion effort. As Dr. Hopkins reported to the General Convention in 1886: 'in our opinion, this church of ours seems to be the only possible center around which any organic unity can be formed it is our duty to lead the way'.<sup>61</sup> The same sentiment appears to have also existed among English churchmen. The *Liverpool Mercury* reported on 4 February 1875 that Dean Stanley, in his address before Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV at Westminster Abbey, 'dwelt at length on the propriety and feasibility of sinking all minor differences, and fusing all Christian churches, adopting the essential principles of Protestant Christianity in one united church.'<sup>62</sup> Vilatte, while Brown lived, and just after his death, believed that the Episcopal Church, if it had confidence in its Catholic identity, could indeed be a rallying point for Christian reunion, drawing together all of those 'who have been baptized in the one and only Church of Christ, which is the Catholic Church.'<sup>63</sup> Even at this early stage, in late 1888, however, Vilatte was careful to delineate the Old Catholic mission from the Episcopalians. Reunion, he believed, was not a matter of organic union, but of independent Catholic Churches being attached to one another as equals for the cause of Catholic unity, and to combat the schismatic Roman Church which 'divides the body of Christ and violates Catholic principles.'<sup>64</sup> Vilatte's

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<sup>61</sup> 'Episcopal Triennial', *The Inter Ocean*, 21 October 1886, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> 'Dean Stanley On The Union Of Christendom', *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 February 1875, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> R. Vilatte, 'The Old Catholics In The United States', *The Churchman*, 11 August 1888, 183-184, p. 183.

<sup>64</sup> R. Vilatte, 'The Old Catholics In The United States', *The Churchman*, 11 August 1888, 183-184, p. 183.

correspondence with the Dutch in the period immediately after Brown's death (1888-1890), however, shook his own confidence that the Episcopal Church could ever fully undertake Catholic reform, and thus be a safe harbour for Christian reunion. What is more, the emphasis on organic union within the Episcopal Church, as well as his experience with Bishop Grafton between 1889 and 1891, convinced Vilatte that his Independent Catholics would be assimilated and required to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles, something that neither he nor his followers were prepared to accept. This played a central role in his later opposition to Kozlowski's move to unite with the Episcopal Church.

When Vilatte corresponded with the Dutch Old Catholic clergy between 1888 and 1890 he unsuccessfully tried to convince them that any arrangement for an Old Catholic bishop in the United States ought to be 'in perfect communion' with the Protestant Episcopal bishop of Fond du Lac.<sup>65</sup> Fr. van Santen wrote to Vilatte in 1890 and explained, 'We cannot without injustice treat Roman Catholics as enemies while seeking alliance with Anglicans. If we accuse the church of Rome of having changed her faith we should at the same time separate ourselves from Anglicanism.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 5. Both Harderwyk and Wormhout expressed their dismay that Vilatte sought to maintain the working communion with the Episcopalians.

<sup>66</sup> *Letter from 'L'Etincelle' of Paris, France, concerning the acceptance of the Protestant Episcopalian Faith by Bishop Kozlowski, Chicago, 1903.* This may be an excerpt from van Santen's 30 May 1890 letter to Vilatte, significant excerpts of which were published in *Ecclesiastical Relations*, and which includes the following: 'It would be unjust. In Mgrs. Herzog and Reinkens to treat the Roman bishops as enemies, and

Vilatte's desire was borne not merely out of respect for the successful working relationship he had forged with Bishop Brown and the diocese since 1885, but also from his conviction of the need to work towards Christian reunion.

On 7 September 1891, while waiting for his consecration in Ceylon, Vilatte wrote a letter to Coxe in reply to an earlier letter from him. In it Vilatte shared with Coxe his hope for the future shape of his work in relation to the work of the Episcopalians.

As in past times...God gives everyone his special mission. St. Peter hath received the mission to preach to the Hebrews and St. Paul to the Gentiles. To us, Old Catholics is given the mission to preach to those which the Episcopal Church cannot reach. Peter and Paul lived together in peace and charity, no doubt it will be the law between us.<sup>67</sup>

Vilatte, in the same letter, reassured Coxe that the Independent Catholics were not competing with the Episcopal Church. Though their respective missions were different, they were working to achieve the same end. Coxe appears to have shared Vilatte's vision, and urged him to establish relationships with the Polish independents in his own diocese.<sup>68</sup> Vilatte went on to express his belief that such a constructive arrangement would build relations such that in time 'make them more and more favorable to a liberal and independent union, so to procure the peace of

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the Anglican bishops as friends, just because the latter are personal sympathisers.'; Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, 12-13, p. 12.

<sup>67</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Coxe, 7 September 1891.

<sup>68</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Coxe to Vilatte, 11 November 1891.

the church'.<sup>69</sup> Writing to Coxe in September 1892, again in reply to a letter from him to Vilatte, shortly after his return from Ceylon, Vilatte envisioned the cooperation of his Independent Catholics and the 'Catholic Party' of the Episcopal church as a continuation of the 'large soul and of truly fatherly love' of Bishop Brown.<sup>70</sup> '[A]ll lovers of the truth will see in it a proof of how much in earnest Bishop Brown was in his desire that the two Churches, though distinct might be harmonious and cooperative, and to how great an extent I shared these good wishes.'<sup>71</sup> In the same letter Vilatte added that not everyone within the Episcopal Church was happy about the arrangement, noting that these sought '[p]erfect organic union of the two Churches instead of intercommunion only'.<sup>72</sup> For Vilatte, Catholic unity did not demand institutional assimilation. Vilatte believed, and Coxe it seems agreed, that the arrangement with Bishop Brown, unusual as it was, had the potential to further the goal of Christian reunion.

Their attempt to take steps to heal the rift caused by the events leading up to Vilatte's consecration in 1892 was futile. In October 1892, the House of Bishops meeting in Baltimore condemned Vilatte and declared both him and his consecrators non-Catholics. Vilatte, in his response of January 1893, acknowledged that Bishop Grafton's actions had been so divisive that the chasm between the American

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<sup>69</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Coxe, 7 September 1891.

<sup>70</sup> Vilatte to Coxe, *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, 8-10, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> Vilatte to Coxe, *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, 8-10, p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Vilatte to Coxe, *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, 8-10, p. 9.



Independent Catholics and the Protestant Episcopal Church was now permanent and ever widening.<sup>73</sup> It was impossible, he argued, to combat the heretical teachings of Calvinism and the increasing popularity of Liberal Protestantism (both existing barriers to Christian reunion), if the Catholic party of the Episcopal Church were placing obstacles to cooperation and unity between themselves and Vilatte's Independent Catholics.

Antoni Kozłowski's consecration in 1897 was controversial among the Polish Independent Catholics aligned with Vilatte because he broke with the community in order to secure episcopal consecration for himself and later, between 1901 and 1903, with Grafton's support, sought to unite his Polish Old Catholics with the Episcopal Church. Vilatte was vexed by Kozłowski's appeal to the Episcopal Church, and was not alone in questioning if Kozłowski had abandoned Catholicism in favour of Protestantism for the convenience of Christian reunion. Moreover, given his own history with the European Old Catholics between 1888 and 1890, Kozłowski's decision to seek intercommunion with the Episcopal Church raised the issue of doctrinal compromise debated across the denominational spectrum during the nineteenth century, and a central issue of Vilatte's 1893 protest against the House of Bishops condemnation of him. Which church, the Old Catholic or the Episcopalian would compromise its defining doctrine in order to facilitate union with the other

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<sup>73</sup> René Vilatte, 'An Open Answer And A Frank Statement', *The Old Catholic*, January 1893, p. 1.

through Kozlowski? Kozlowski's move, and Vilatte's reaction to it form part of the backdrop to Vilatte's correspondence with Mar Dionysius in 1905, and the realisation that ecclesiastical politics and sectarian interests would continue to impede Christian reunion for the foreseeable future.

Kozlowski was an ally of Vilatte's until Stefan Kaminski was elected bishop at a meeting of the Polish Independents in Buffalo in September 1896. When he lost the election, he and his supporters spent much of the next year appealing both to Vilatte and to the Old Catholics in Europe to be consecrated.<sup>74</sup> Vilatte refused, on the grounds that the Polish community did not elect Kozlowski. Herzog, now decidedly opposed to Vilatte, was not entirely convinced that Kozlowski and his supporters were truly aligned with Old Catholic ideals. However, he and Grafton believed that supporting Kozlowski was a means of impeding Vilatte's influence amongst immigrant independents in the United States.<sup>75</sup> Herzog successfully persuaded the other Old Catholic bishops at a special meeting in Berne that consecrating Kozlowski was worth the risk. On 21 November 1897 Herzog, along with bishops Theodore Weber of Bonn and Gerard Gul of Utrecht, consecrated Antoni Kozlowski in Berne.<sup>76</sup> Now there were two rival Old Catholic hierarchs in the United States.

At the Episcopal Church's General Convention in San Francisco in 1901, Bishop

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<sup>74</sup> 'A Retrospect', *The American Old Catholic*, May 1915, p. 7; Laurence J. Orzell, 'A Pragmatic Union: Bishop Kozlowski And The Old Catholics, 1896-1898', *Polish American Studies* (Spring 1987), 5-24, pp. 6, 7, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Orzell, 'Curious Allies', p. 44.

<sup>76</sup> Orzell, 'Curious Allies', p. 43.

Henry Potter of New York presented a memorial from Kozlowski appealing to the Episcopal Church to be admitted to intercommunion on the grounds of the Lambeth Quadrilateral.<sup>77</sup> There was little enthusiasm for Kozlowski's application, and it was put into the hands of a committee that never met. At a special meeting of Episcopal bishops in Cincinnati in April 1902 the issue was revived, and again deferred to a committee which never met. Kozlowski, meanwhile, established a committee within his own community to further study the issue of intercommunion with the Episcopal Church. Their report recognised that the church, and Kozlowski, needed 'friendship, advice, prayer, aid and sympathy'.<sup>78</sup> A meeting of the Episcopal Bishops in Philadelphia on 24 October 1902, after what was reported to be a very long discussion, passed a resolution which again deferred the matter to a committee, but worded in such a way as to politely ask Kozlowski to go away.

Whereas, the Rt. Rev. Anthony [*sic*] Kozlowski...has accepted the terms of the Chicago-Lambeth proposals for unity and has further assured us of his repudiation of Roman errors, and has applied to us on these terms for recognition and intercommunion; therefore be it resolved, that the bishops, not assuming to recognize the organization of the church of which he is bishop, extend to him their Christian salutations and assurances of

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<sup>77</sup> Orzell, 'Curious Allies', p. 48.

<sup>78</sup> Orzell, 'Curious Allies', p. 50.

affectionate sympathy and interest in his work.<sup>79</sup>

Two days later, on 26 October, *The Chicago Tribune* reported that 'leading clergymen of the Episcopal church also affirm that the union of the two churches is impossible,' and added that Kozlowski denied that he was seeking to merge his church with the Episcopal Church.<sup>80</sup> Kozlowski's sights were set on a much grander vision.

According to the report, Kozlowski had also made overtures to other denominations. 'Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist, Episcopalian, all together, that is my intent.'<sup>81</sup> He told the reporter. 'All believe in the same Christ and hold work together as one body.'<sup>82</sup> Kozlowski, said the report, 'wishes to include all [denominations] in the great church which it is his chief ambition to create.'<sup>83</sup>

Bishop Weber, one of Kozlowski's consecrators, wrote to him from Bonn on 20 November 1902, expressed astonishment and dismay over Kozlowski's actions, and demanded an explanation. Weber first criticised Kozlowski for taking action without consulting the other Old Catholic bishops, in part because it was a breach of their union, but also because his actions would naturally have repercussions for them in Europe. By signing the Union of Utrecht, Weber reminded Kozlowski, 'you most solemnly engaged yourself to enter into no union whatever with any bishop or

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<sup>79</sup> 'Union Of Churches', *The Saint Paul Globe*, 25 October 1902, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> 'Kozlowski Opposes A Merger', *Chicago Tribune*, 26 October 1902, p. 8.

<sup>81</sup> 'Kozlowski Opposes A Merger', *Chicago Tribune*, 26 October 1902, p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> 'Kozlowski Opposes A Merger', *Chicago Tribune*, 26 October 1902, p. 8.

<sup>83</sup> 'Kozlowski Opposes A Merger', *Chicago Tribune*, 26 October 1902, p. 8.

church whatever, save only with the consent of your consecrators, or of the European Old Catholic bishops in communion with each other and with yourself.<sup>84</sup> Weber must have been especially angered by this because, only four months earlier, in August 1902, Kozlowski had had ample opportunity to discuss the matter with the other bishops while he attended the Old Catholic Congress in Berlin. Weber was already wary of the Old Catholics being too close to the Protestant Anglicans, and Kozlowski's action seemed to bring this concern to the fore. 'I do not think it possible, indeed, that you, a truly Catholic bishop,...would look and long for union with some or other Protestant Church which has sprung from the sixteenth century Reformation.'<sup>85</sup> Before his consecration, Weber, Herzog and Gul were concerned that Kozlowski was too Roman Catholic in his thinking and practice. Weber's letter shows that they were now concerned that Kozlowski had moved in the opposite direction, towards the Protestants.

The other Polish Independent Catholics, including those aligned with Vilatte, openly criticised Kozlowski's move as a betrayal of Polish ethnicity and of Catholic identity.<sup>86</sup> Vilatte did not engage with the issue of ethnic preservation, but he did criticise Kozlowski for seemingly abandoning orthodox Catholicism in favour of Protestant Episcopalianism. A pamphlet entitled *Letter From 'L'Etincelle' of Paris, France, Concerning The Acceptance of The Protestant Episcopalian Faith by Bishop*

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<sup>84</sup> Fond du Lac, Pamphlets, *Theodor Weber to Antoni Kozlowski*, 20 November 1902.

<sup>85</sup> Fond du Lac, Pamphlets, *Theodor Weber to Antoni Kozlowski*, 20 November 1902.

<sup>86</sup> Orzell, 'Curious Allies', p. 54.

*Koslowski* [sic] was published in Paris in early 1903, and was republished at Vilatte's behest in English in Chicago that same year. The pamphlet outlines the doctrinal points which it says Kozlowski has subscribed to in order to present his application to the House of Bishops, and details how twelve years earlier European Old Catholics urged Vilatte to sever his relations with the Episcopalians. 'To put it plainly,' *L'Etincelle* wrote, 'Bishop Koslowski [sic] openly abandons the profession of faith of the Old Catholics to subscribe to that of the Protestant Episcopal church.'<sup>87</sup> The sting in the tail of *L'Etincelle*'s pamphlet however, was not directed at Kozlowski, but at the European Old Catholics. Between 1889 and 1890 they instructed Vilatte, who wanted to maintain his relationship with the Episcopalians, in part to promote Christian reunion, to sever his ties because the Anglicans were not Catholic. Was Kozlowski's appeal to the House of Bishops also at the European Old Catholic bishops' behest? 'If the answer is in the affirmative then we must recognize the fact that it is not the Episcopalians who have changed their [doctrinal] position but it is the Old Catholics who have changed theirs.'<sup>88</sup> *L'Etincelle* accuses the European Old Catholics of having introduced confusion, and even a barrier to an otherwise successful relationship that could have set the standard for future progress towards Christian reunion, when it ordered Vilatte to dissolve his working relationship with the Episcopalians.

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<sup>87</sup> AT Collection, Pamphlets, *Letter From 'L'Etincelle' of Paris, France, Concerning The Acceptance Of The Protestant Episcopalian Faith By Bishop Koslowski* (Chicago: 1903).

<sup>88</sup> AT Collection, Pamphlets, *Letter From 'L'Etincelle' of Paris, France, Concerning The Acceptance Of The Protestant Episcopalian Faith By Bishop Koslowski* (Chicago: 1903).

Up to this point Vilatte appears not to have known about Weber's letter to Kozlowski. In the Summer of 1904, however, someone within Kozlowski's church sent it to Vilatte.<sup>89</sup> On 2 February 1905 he published *An Open Letter To All the Bishops, Priests, Deacons and Faithful of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* which, in addition to criticising Weber for refusing to recognise Protestants as Christians, and thus placing another barrier in the path to Christian reunion, Vilatte declares:

This letter...contains proof positive of the fact that, according to the Old Catholics, to be in or to seek to enter into, communion with the Anglican or Episcopal churches is to 'desert the Catholic Church or the Church of Christ' — and this in spite of the fact that for thirty years past the Old Catholics have been on intimate terms with Canterbury and Fond du Lac.<sup>90</sup>

In Vilatte's mind, Weber's letter was evidence that neither the Anglicans nor the European Old Catholics were consistent, nor could they be relied upon as sound partners in the project of Christian reunion. In exasperation Vilatte admits 'It seems to me that I behold the approach of universal Christian reunion, without and against

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<sup>89</sup> The description given by the Notary Public, J. Ambrose Gearon, on 18 August 1904, makes it clear that Vilatte was in possession of the original, and not a copy; Fond du Lac, Pamphlets, *Theodor Weber to Antoni Kozlowski*, 20 November 1902.

<sup>90</sup> Fond du Lac, Pamphlets, J. R. Vilatte, *An Open Letter To All the Bishops, Priests, Deacons and Faithful the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (Chicago: 2 February 1905).

them.’<sup>91</sup>

What are we to make of this tangled web? First it is worth noting that the Kozlowski affair took shape soon after the 1900 breakdown of relations between Vilatte and the Roman Catholic Church (discussed in chapter 8). To ask whether those developments may have influenced Vilatte’s reaction to Kozlowski’s attempts to unite with the Episcopal Church is pure speculation. It seems reasonable, however, to propose that his own sense of embarrassment or self-recrimination for having once again been naive about Rome, may have made Vilatte particularly sensitive to the consequences of compromising Catholic identity in the name of Christian reunion. We cannot explore the ecclesiastical politics here, but it is understandable that Vilatte should have felt some bitterness: at Kozlowski, a former ally who could not respect the democratic choice of his own community; at Grafton’s continued vendetta against Vilatte for defying him; and at the European Old Catholics, whose consecration of Kozlowski in Vilatte’s mind constituted an impediment to the spread of Catholic reform in the United States, and whose seemingly schizophrenic relationship with the Anglicans was an impediment to the progress of Christian reunion. Vilatte’s principal objections to Kozlowski’s failed attempts to unite with the Episcopal Church were that it would have required Kozlowski to accept Anglican (i.e., Protestant) doctrine, and it was not

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<sup>91</sup> Fond du Lac, Pamphlets, J. R. Vilatte, *An Open Letter To All the Bishops, Priests, Deacons and Faithful the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (Chicago: 2 February 1905).



intercommunion between two equal, independent, Catholic churches, but an organic union which would, at least in the eyes of those Episcopalians promoting it, eventually result in the complete assimilation and anglicisation of the Polish church. The apparent inconsistency, and the belief that the Anglicans were trying to become the centre of all reunion efforts, played a significant role in concurrent events in India, and in Vilatte's exchanges in 1905 with his fellow Metropolitan, Mar Dionysius.

E. M. Philip, Mar Dionysos' personal secretary, wrote an essay for publication in *The Church Times*, in early 1904 which, through an account of the continuing difficulties between the Syrian church in India and the evangelical Church Missionary Society (CMS), linked Christian reunion and ecclesiastical politics and sectarian interests there.<sup>92</sup> An unexpected consequence of Philip's essay, the response by both the CMS in India and American Anglicans through the *Living Church* drew Vilatte into the conflict as they accused both Mar Dionysius and Vilatte of interfering in another church and in so doing impeding the progress of Christian reunion.

Between 1 January and 12 February 1904 *The Church Times* published a serial essay written by E. M. Philip. Over the course of six instalments, Philip surveyed the history, doctrine and liturgical practice of the Church in India, as well as its contact with agents of the CMS from 1816 to 1904. Philip's aims were: to inform English and

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<sup>92</sup> This is covered in more detail in Chapter 7.

American high churchmen that the Syrian Church was the ancient and national church of Christian Indians; to demonstrate that there was no substantive doctrinal barrier between Syrian Christians and other Catholics; and to protest to English high churchmen about CMS missionaries' efforts to assimilate Indian Christians into the Anglican Church and make them Protestants. Philip expressed the disappointment of many Malabar churchmen that 'the Protestant missionaries of the C.M.S. working in their midst represent the whole Church of England, and, indeed, the English nation in general; and hence it is very difficult for them to conceive the Catholic aspect of that Church, or to compromise her doctrines and rituals with their own.'<sup>93</sup>

Philip opens his essay stating that some readers of *The Church Times* may be unaware 'of the very existence of a National Church in India', and of its origins in the Apostolic age.<sup>94</sup> He outlines the key historic events in the development of the church from St. Thomas' arrival in the first century, and the church's struggle to maintain its orthodoxy, to the arrival of the Roman Catholics in the fifteenth century, and their subjugation of the Church. 'To the Syrian Community, the presence of a European Power, bearing the name of Christ and preaching the theory of Christian brotherhood, meant deliverance from Hindu oppression. But unfortunately the emissaries of Rome seized the opportunity to impose Roman Catholicism upon this innocent community.'<sup>95</sup> For fifty years, he laments, Roman Catholic officials

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<sup>93</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 22 January 1904, p. 111.

<sup>94</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 1 January 1904, p. 21.

<sup>95</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 1 January 1904, p. 21.

attempted to suppress the Syrian Church. Its stalwart members, however, continued in secret, until they could once again openly re-connect with the Patriarch of Antioch. Philip wished to impress upon his English readers that the very survival of the church through periods of Hindu and Roman Catholic oppression to the beginning of the nineteenth century, when CMS missionaries first arrived, was 'nothing short of a miracle'.<sup>96</sup> Likewise, that it was able to 'maintain, as she actually did, the main principles of Christian doctrines unimpaired all along these dark ages' proved that God's providence protected India's own national church.<sup>97</sup> Philip's historical outline was designed to appeal to the sensibilities of English high churchmen, many of whom balked at the idea of invading or interfering in the territory or ecclesiastical affairs of another national Catholic Church. Philip's opening essay also hints that he is appealing to the Lambeth Quadrilateral, which, in the interest of Christian unity, promised aid to national Catholic bodies seeking to promote reform, and to combat the Roman Catholic Church.

Philip understood that his Church's non-Chalcedonian position was seen by Western Catholics as an impediment to any discussion of intercommunion or reunion. His second and third instalments surveyed Syrian doctrine. The question of Monophysitism, however, took up most of the second instalment. Philip quotes the sixth century Mar Philexinos of Mabug to state the official Syrian position.

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<sup>96</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 1 January 1904, p. 21.

<sup>97</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 1 January 1904, p. 21.

Again we anathematise the Council of Chalcedon, because in the one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Begotten Son of God, it *separates* the natures and the properties, and the action, and the heights, and the humiliations, and the divinities, and the humanities, and thinks of Him as *two*, and brings in *Quarternity*, and worships the simple son of man...My faith is in the Trinity, and the Trinity is not defective...And not receiving another person extrinsic to Itself.<sup>98</sup>

The evidence from the Syrian fathers, argued Philip is clear 'enough to convince all unprejudiced theologians' that the teachings of the Syrian Church in India were orthodox.<sup>99</sup> Philip enforces this by adding a personal note. 'I firmly believe that the Chalcedon Fathers, as well as the Church to which I belong, differ only in the word they use, but hold the same doctrine. Both are unanimous in denying *separability*, *confusion*, *change*, and *divisibility* in the union, as also in affirming the *preservation* of the properties of the nature, in their entity.'<sup>100</sup> Philip concludes his discussion about Monophysitism and asserts that as 'long as the definitions of the Incarnation in the Athanasian Creed constitute the belief of the Western Church the Syrians can have no cause of complaint against the latter.'<sup>101</sup> Philip's discussion about Monophysitism

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<sup>98</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 8 January 1904, p. 34.

<sup>99</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 8 January 1904, p. 34.

<sup>100</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 8 January 1904, p. 34 (emphasis in original).

<sup>101</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 8 January 1904, p. 34.

casts light on Vilatte's own claims to uphold the doctrine of the seven councils of the undivided church. Like Philip, Vilatte understood that the label of Monophysitism was a barrier to the progress of Christian reunion, and on numerous occasions, including his defence against the House of Bishops' condemnation of him, he employed similar arguments to show that he and his colleagues in India were orthodox Catholics. Philip concludes his survey of doctrine, ritual and history with a stark declaration which establishes the substance of his main complaint. 'As far as the Malabar Church is concerned, the representations of Western Christendom always presented obstacles to any consideration of reunion. The Church of Rome, with which the Syrians first came in contact, rigorously maintained a hostile attitude. But a better understanding could have been arrived at, when the C.M.S. missionaries worked among the Syrians.'<sup>102</sup>

According to Philip's account, between 1816 when the first CMS missionaries arrived to help administer the newly opened theological college in Kottayam,<sup>103</sup> and 1836, when CMS missionaries broke into the college treasury and stole its funds, in apparent retaliation for the Syrian Church's refusal to accept the doctrinal and liturgical changes imposed upon them by the CMS through Daniel Wilson, the Anglican bishop of Calcutta,<sup>104</sup> their relationship was constructive and harmonious.

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<sup>102</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 22 January 1904, p. 111.

<sup>103</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 1 January 1904, p. 21.

<sup>104</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 5 February 1904, p. 176.

The evangelical zeal of the missionaries was kept in check by instructions from the committee in England, that they were not to interfere in the affairs of the church and, quoting a CMS source, 'should any consideration induce them to wish such a measure, it would be highly expedient to dissuade them from adopting it' in order to preserve their independence, and to prevent ill will between the Syrian and Anglican Churches.<sup>105</sup> The attempted forced assimilation and theft of college funds naturally ruptured the relationship, and from 1836 the CMS, according to Philip, aggressively proselytised Syrian Christians and sought to make them Anglican Protestants. Many Syrian Christians, he observed, believed that the Protestant missionaries were representative of Anglicanism, and consequently wanted nothing to do with any Anglicans. That, however, was beginning to change. What the Protestant party of the Church of England could not achieve by force, was quietly evolving as more publications and educational material from the Catholic wing of that church became available in India.

A conviction is now gaining ground in the minds of educated Syrians, that the creed, doctrines, and ritual of the Church of England, represented by the Catholic party, bear a favourable comparison with those of the Syrian Church, and that, had this field been first occupied by the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel," [instead of the CMS] there would never have arisen any

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<sup>105</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 5 February 1904, p. 176.

occasion for an unpleasant rupture, mutual intercommunion would have been an accomplished fact long ago, and both Churches could have unanimously worked for the conversion of the heathen, with far better results.<sup>106</sup>

In effect Philip argued, the situation in India was a missed opportunity. Protestant missionaries, because they sowed confusion and schism<sup>107</sup> within the national Catholic Church of India, rather than combining their efforts for the common cause, were an impediment both to converting Hindus, and to the progress of Christian reunion.

Within weeks, the CMS hastily published a pamphlet from the S.P.C.K. press in Madras entitled *The Real Proselytizers Not The C.M.S.: A Statement For The Anglican Episcopate; Facts And Original Documents Showing Proselytizing By The Jacobite Metropolitans Of Malabar And Disorderly Consecrations By Order Of The Jacobite Patriarch Of Antioch*, designed to counter Philip's essay in *The Church Times*. Dionysius was angry, they argued, because the CMS successfully reformed the Jacobite churches in India, organising a church independent of the Patriarch, and which now 'professed full sympathy with the *Prayer book and Articles of The Church of*

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<sup>106</sup> E. M., Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 22 January 1904, p. 111.

<sup>107</sup> The schism is discussed in chapter 7.

*England*.<sup>108</sup> In February 1843, nearly a decade after the events described by Philip in his essay, Bishop Wilson, in a speech in Kottayam, asserted that the rupture, and subsequent proselytising was necessary, until such time that the Syrian Orthodox also conform to the proposed reforms.<sup>109</sup> Whether this was reform or schism is a matter of framing the situation, but regardless of that, the CMS pamphlet admitted the premise of Philip's complaint, as Bishop Wilson earlier acknowledged. The CMS was responsible for the schism (or re-organised and reformed church), and that rupture was an obstacle to intercommunion between the Syrian and Anglican churches. Though the CMS held that as they represented good ecclesial order and conduct, it was in fact the obstinate Syrians who were at fault. The pamphlet then accused Dionysius of insulting the Anglican Church both in the Church's official press, and through his sanctioning of a fraudulent and disorderly consecration of Vilatte, a deposed Episcopal priest, for an Episcopal diocese in America. Thus, the pamphlet claims, it was Dionysius, and not the CMS, who was the proselytiser and impediment to Christian reunion.

The CMS claimed that while they had avoided even the suggestion of hostile action within India, Dionysius antagonised the Anglican Church in India and abroad through the church's media, and had continuously 'been insulting the Church of England Missionaries and boasting of every supposed Romanistic success in that

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<sup>108</sup> *The Real Proselytizers Not The C.M.S.: A Statement For The Anglican Episcopate* (Madras, 1904), p. 1.

<sup>109</sup> W. J. Richards, *The Indian Christians Of St. Thomas Otherwise Called The Syrian Christians of Malabar* (London: Bemrose & Sons, 1908), pp. 126, 128-129.



Church; but notwithstanding this we have been patient and studiously refrained from anything that could even appear to be hostile.’<sup>110</sup> Use of the term ‘Romanistic’ in this context was both an attack against Dionysius and the Syrians for not accepting Protestant reform, and a jibe at Philip for his appeal to, and apparent alignment with the ‘Catholic party’ of the Anglican Church. However, the substantive portion of quotes from the ‘original documents’ proving that the Syrians were themselves an impediment to Christian reunion, came from the letters of Grafton, whom many low-churchmen at the time labelled an extreme ritualist. It seems likely that this was done to show that although Philip appealed to English and American high churchmen, they also opposed him and Dionysos. The pamphlet quotes from a Syrian Church paper from 1892, celebrating Vilatte’s consecration:

By reason of this we shall be incited to undertake with full courage works more troublesome than this. This being so, beloved, we ought to congratulate on this occasion our ...honoured Brother Mar Dionysius, Metropolitan, who *principally has endeavoured to make the members of foreign churches in Ceylon, Goa, America and other countries, branches of our Church; ...also Mar Timotheos Metropolitan, [René Vilatte], who has taken a long journey from the new world of America to seek the jewel of our true faith and has secured that precious boon.*<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> *Real Proselytizers Not The C.M.S.*, p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> *Real Proselytizers Not The C.M.S.*, p. 6.

Vilatte's consecration, argued the pamphlet, was done to spite the Anglican Church, and to invade and sow disunity in Anglican churches abroad. Vilatte's return to the diocese of Fond du Lac, and his activity in England and Wales, where he ordained Fr. Ignatius in 1898 and consecrated Henry Marsh-Edwards for England in 1903, showed that the Syrian Church was not interested in Christian unity, nor did it respect the integrity of other Churches. The pamphlet quotes a letter which Grafton wrote in 1892, that was included in material sent to the CMS in India in response to their request for information in order to compile the pamphlet: 'I cannot understand why any Eastern Bishop should so desire to antagonize the Anglican Church in America.'<sup>112</sup>

The element of Philip's account which must have angered the CMS most was the accusation of dishonesty and theft. The pamphlet repeatedly accused Dionysius of being dishonest, but it also accused Vilatte, Alvares, and Dionysius of conspiring to fraudulently arrange Vilatte's consecration, again, in order to spite the Anglican Church. The pamphlet points to the consecration of Mar Athanasius Matthew, who was the original leader of the schism that the CMS caused in India. 'The Jacobites maintain that the late Mar Athanasius Matthew "forged and produced a letter to the Patriarch that he should be ordained a Bishop" and "thus deceived the Patriarch." Apparently René Vilatte has done the same with the cognizance of Mar Dionysius V and his suffragans.'<sup>113</sup> This was a condemnation of the whole Syrian Church

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<sup>112</sup> *Real Proselytizers Not The C.M.S.*, p. 3.

<sup>113</sup> *Real Proselytizers Not The C.M.S.*, p. 3.

hierarchy, its key Metropolitans, Dionysius, Alvares, and Vilatte, as well as the Patriarch, and according to the pamphlet demonstrated the disorderly conduct and immorality of the Syrian Church leadership. What is more, it is likely that this accusation played a role in, and may have been the source of, both Brandreth and Anson's later claims that Vilatte's consecration was fraudulently arranged.<sup>114</sup> Accusing the Syrians of being 'unfair, disorderly, and subversive of unity and morality', the pamphlet argues that it was not the CMS that was an obstacle to reunion, but Mar Dionysius and Vilatte.<sup>115</sup>

*The Living Church Annual* for 1905 reported on the fractious situation thus: '[C]harges and counter charges were made by each party against the other, the Syrians charging the C.M.S missionaries with endeavors to Protestantize their Church and to proselytise their people...while the C.M.S. authorities maintain that various superstitious practices and objectionable features are permitted to remain and grow within the Syrian Church.'<sup>116</sup> *The Living Church*, as an Anglo-Catholic publication, was no friend of the evangelical CMS, which it described as blocking 'other sections of the Anglican Communion' from having 'the opportunity of entering into direct relations with the Syrian Church.'<sup>117</sup> The report linked the bad

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<sup>114</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, pp. 33-34; Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 108.

<sup>115</sup> *Real Proselytizers Not The C.M.S.*, p. 1.

<sup>116</sup> *Living Church Annual* (Milwaukee: The Young Churchman Co., 1905), p. 91.

<sup>117</sup> *Living Church Annual*, 1905, p. 91.

behaviour of the CMS and the allegedly equally bad consecration of the now seemingly disgraced Vilatte. The Syrian Church, according to the report, through Philip's essay in *The Church Times*, has 'made an earnest plea to Anglicans of England and the United States for help and intercommunion.'<sup>118</sup> Intercommunion, the report states, has to that point been hindered by 'friction between the native Church and the local representatives (C.M.S.) of the Church of England, and by the consecration as Bishop by the Syrians of *René Vilatte*, a deposed priest of the American Church, in Old Catholic orders, whose career has been erratic, and whose episcopal orders have been pronounced by the American House of Bishops to be "null and void".'<sup>119</sup> The report not only mis-represented Philip's plea as an application for intercommunion, rather than what it really was, a statement that the activities of the CMS had hindered any progress that might have been otherwise made in relation to intercommunion and Christian reunion, but it also asserted, in line with the CMS pamphlet, that Vilatte's consecration was an act of spite on the part of the Syrians against the Anglican Church, which the report claimed, 'Syrian representatives' now regret. 'The Syrians now explain that his consecration was made under a misapprehension of the facts concerning Vilatte, and that they no longer recognize Vilatte as in communion with them.'<sup>120</sup> Contemporary letters exchanged between Vilatte and Mar Dionysius, some of which included Philip, show that this assertion

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<sup>118</sup> *Living Church Annual*, 1905, p. 98.

<sup>119</sup> *Living Church Annual*, 1905, p. 98.

<sup>120</sup> *Living Church Annual*, 1905, p. 98.

was wrong. However, *The Living Church* suggests that, having disavowed Vilatte, the Syrian Church in India had paved the way for the successful outcome of their application for intercommunion with the Anglicans.

Three themes are present not only in the 1904 CMS pamphlet, which cast Vilatte and Mar Dionysius as antagonists and impediments to Christian reunion, the 1905 *Living Church* report which claimed that Mar Dionysius was seeking intercommunion with the Anglicans, and Vilatte's 1904 reaction to Kozlowski's attempt to forge intercommunion between his Polish Old Catholics and the Episcopal Church. Firstly compromising the Catholic faith, or indeed accepting the Protestant faith in the name of Christian reunion; secondly, antagonising another church as an impediment to reunion efforts; finally, and not unrelated, proselytising in what another church perceives as its sphere or territory. These form the context of Vilatte's correspondence with Mar Dionysius during the spring and summer of 1905 in which they discussed the CMS pamphlet and *The Living Church's* report about Philip's serial in *The Church Times*. Dionysius appears to have opened the conversation in a letter to Vilatte dated 5 May 1905. Two of Vilatte's replies are available, the first dated 20 June 1905, and the second dated 24 August 1905. It appears that the first never reached Dionysius, neither did a second, which we do not have. The August letter, a third attempt, however, did reach Dionysius. These letters show that Vilatte was not disconnected from the Indian Church and its issues,

and that he and Mar Dionysius, through Dionysius' secretary E. M. Philip, discussed Christian reunion in particular.

In his letter to Dionysius of 20 June 1905, Vilatte wrote: 'I ... think that you in Malabar and we in America can do a great deal for the reunion of Christendom, without compromising our faith'.<sup>121</sup> He believed that reunion could only be realised along Catholic principles, the only foundation that was, in his mind, truly universal. Any doctrinal compromise or addition, not sanctioned by the universal episcopate (an ecumenical council) was doomed to introduce confusion in identity, discord and heterodoxy. This is what Kozlowski appeared to do when he sought intercommunion with the Episcopal Church. Vilatte, though embarrassed at having done so, did not shrink from accusing himself of having done the same thing in 1899 when he negotiated with the Roman Catholics. 'I very sorrowfully confess that I had turned to the abominable heresy of Rome six years ago. It did not take me more than six months to see the abomination and desolation of that heretical and schismatical Roman Church, I immediately took my stand before God, rose, and worked against the lie of Rome, in favor of our Holy Orthodox faith.'<sup>122</sup> Vilatte appears to draw a parallel between his own experience in the United States and Dionysius' experiences with evangelical Anglican missionaries in India. 'You must understand that Bishop Grafton and the Popish Bishop have united together to kill my work and reputation. Bishop Grafton, because I did not want to accept his jurisdiction, and the Roman,

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<sup>121</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Mar Dionysius V, 20 June 1905.

<sup>122</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Mar Dionysius V, 20 June 1905.

because through my missionary work they have lost five hundred thousand Roman Catholics among the Pole [*sic*], Belgian and French people.<sup>123</sup> Given the context, Vilatte discussing his moment of weakness in 1899, he is, in part, alluding to Kozlowski's schism and consecration.

In acknowledging the strain of setbacks and his own failure, Vilatte sought to bolster Dionysius, and to help him avoid a similar mistake: 'In spite of all persecution, sorrow and trouble I have today, under my jurisdiction, 13 priests, three churches and four missions. In a few years from now, with the help of God, our Church will be brilliantly successful, but at present it is a trying struggle and a terrible one.'<sup>124</sup> Vilatte goes on to ask Dionysius to confirm if the report in *The Living Church* was accurate, citing his own desire to be prepared to defend Dionysius and the Church in India (suggesting that even without Dioynosios' having said so, Vilatte found the report unbelievable).

If so, please let me know, if you are willing to accept the Protestant Episcopal faith or the Anglican (which is the same) and under what condition you will accept intercommunion and abandon the Catholic Faith, and the seven holy sacraments? The *Living Church Annual* for 1905, published many things about you on that subject (and our Church) that I hardly believe.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Mar Dionysius V, 20 June 1905.

<sup>124</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Mar Dionysius V, 20 June 1905.

<sup>125</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Mar Dionysius V, 20 June 1905.

Vilatte's third letter of 24 August 1905, shows that Dionysius confirmed in an earlier letter that *The Living Church's* account was false.

I am not surprised to learn through the letter of Mr. Philip that the statement of the Annual of the Living Church for 1905...are not true. It was a surprise to me to read that you had asked for inter-communion with the Anglican Churches. That remarkable book is full of mistakes from cover to cover - the above about yourself being one amongst many.<sup>126</sup>

Vilatte's language suggests that he was thinking that had *The Living Church's* account been accurate, there would have been unmistakeable parallels with the Kozlowski affair. Indeed, because of the timing, one wonders if *The Living Church's* misrepresentation of Philip's letters could have been in part a response to Kozlowski's failed attempt at intercommunion with the Episcopal Church, and Vilatte's protest against that.

Vilatte's language in the same letter suggests that Dionysius shared with him the content of, if not a copy of (we know they exchanged newsletters, and books for example) the CMS pamphlet in which the CMS and Grafton accused Mar Dionysius and Vilatte of antagonising the Anglican Church. For Vilatte this would have had a clear resonance with his experience with the European Old Catholics in 1890, who decided not to establish an Old Catholic hierarchy in the United States stating at the

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<sup>126</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Mar Dionysius V, 20 June 1905.



time that:

All things considered, while we do not regard the Anglican Church as perfect, yet it is our opinion that it is our duty to aid her reformation in a Catholic direction, above all since a great movement is already operating within her in that sense. And we consider that it is not good to put an Old Catholic Episcopate side by side with her's and so produce the scandal of a schism.<sup>127</sup>

Grafton wrote to Vilatte on 30 October 1890, a month after the European Old Catholics made their decision. In his letter Grafton asserted that if he were to release Vilatte from his jurisdiction, he would do so only on the condition that Vilatte leave the country, and added: 'The Old Catholics of Europe have no right to interfere over here. If the Bishop of Rome has not, certainly the Archbishop of Utrecht has not.'<sup>128</sup> Not wanting to antagonise the Anglicans (or more specifically the Anglo-Catholics) the European Old Catholics stepped back from their initial enthusiasm for establishing a hierarchy in the American mission field. A decision they reversed in 1897 under the influence of Herzog and Grafton, when they consecrated Kozlowski, in an effort to frustrate his work, or so believed Vilatte. 'I do not antagonize the Protestant Episcopal Church. I have tried to be friendly with them, in fact I am sorry that the Episcopal church has been misled and deceived by Bishop Grafton. I have

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<sup>127</sup> Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 2.

<sup>128</sup> Grafton to Vilatte, 30 October 1890 in Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 42-43 reproduces the whole letter. Barrette, *Ecclesiastical Relations*, p. 11 reproduces an excerpt.

today, many friends in that Church.’<sup>129</sup> Vilatte is clear, Grafton, and Herzog are the antagonists, and the true impediments to progress in Christian reunion. Dionysius and E. M. Philip clearly viewed the evangelical CMS missionaries as antagonists, their interference in the Indian Church’s affairs caused a schism, and a scandal that had raged from 1836 to the current day. Perhaps the real scandal in Vilatte’s mind was that in 1889 he was ordered by the Dutch Old Catholics to sever his, to that point successful, relationship with the Episcopalians, which even at the time Vilatte argued had the potential for building momentum and support not only Catholic reform, but also Christian reunion.

Proselytising could be seen as an element of antagonising, but it is an aspect which Vilatte draws particular attention to in his 24 August 1905 letter to Dionysius.

According to Mr. Philip you are accused of proselytizing in India if you do so surely it is your duty, especially among the Protestants — if you have no right to seek converts, what authority have the Anglicans to establish Bishoprics in Jerusalem, Gibraltar, Cuba, Mexico, Haiti and Brazil? If you believe that your church has the right Faith you are also bound to spread that Faith in all parts of the world. Do not copy the Jansenists of Europe who have never established themselves outside of Holland. ...If you make converts for Christ and the Orthodox Church, be proud of it and remember that God has entrusted the Church of Antioch the propagation of the true Faith among

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<sup>129</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Mar Dionysius V, 20 June 1905.

Buddhists, Mahomedans, Protestants and Romanists. In fact we are called to proselytize in all parts of the world for the Peace of Jerusalem and the Salvation of Souls.<sup>130</sup>

Vilatte, unlike Anglo-Catholics such as Grafton, did not believe that an active missionary endeavour antagonised another Catholic church, nor did it hinder Christian reunion. He believed that concurrent jurisdiction in the mission field in the United States was not just an ecclesial reality, but that it could serve the purpose both of evangelising different groups of people and cultivating Christian reunion. His experience as a Protestant missionary between 1881 and 1883 was through a Protestant interdenominational project to convert French-speaking immigrants. His Independent Catholic mission was, in his mind at least, a cooperative project with the Episcopalians which allowed him to proselytise francophone immigrants which Bishop Brown admitted the Episcopal church had no hope of converting. Vilatte believed that had the European Old Catholics consecrated a bishop for America, his working relationship with the Episcopalians could have been a model to further reunion, for, as he expressed to Coxe in his letter of September 1891, Peter and Paul had different spheres of the mission field, but were united in their faith. Vilatte was a missionary at heart, and his encouragement of Dionysius not to shrink from his duty to proselytise in India was grounded in that. Catholic churches, as Philip wrote in his 1904 essay, should unite to convert Hindus and Roman Catholics rather than fight

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<sup>130</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Mar Dionysius V, 24 August 1905.

one another. Vilatte saw no contradiction between fostering Christian reunion and missionary activity, both are a duty of Catholic bishops, and, he believed, in the right environment, an active, coordinated missionary effort could foster Christian reunion.

### **Vilatte: Christian Reunion is Catholic, Cooperative, Progressive**

Through comparisons with other contemporary reunion projects, with which Vilatte had contact, or about which he commented, we can better understand his own reunion thinking. The Kozlowski affair, and Vilatte's exchanges with his colleague Mar Dionysius surrounding E. M. Philip's essays published in *The Church Times*, provide us with an opportunity to see how Vilatte engaged with other bishops about Christian reunion, and how he responded to developments touching on the topic. There is a thread that runs through all of these examples: Ferrette and Lee's Independent Catholic reunion projects, the WPR, Kozlowski's failed attempt at uniting with the Episcopal Church, and Philip's essay in *The Church Times* recounting the Syrian Church's troubles with the CMS. That common thread was the question: is Christian reunion a Protestant or a Catholic project, or is it possible, as some Anglicans (and even Ferrette in his earliest phase) supposed, that a compromise between the two might form the basis for reunion? Vilatte believed that Christian reunion was a Catholic project, because a Catholic identity was most faithful to the divinely instituted shape of the church of the Apostolic age, and it was that set of

doctrine and practice that all Christian sects accepted — although he also understood that how each group interpreted that body of doctrine was another matter entirely.

The Liberal Protestantism of Bishop Philips Brooks, Barrows and Seward abandoned key features of the apostolic deposit in the interests of persuading the disillusioned in America to return to a non-Catholic Christianity. Vilatte had believed, at least since the mid-1880s, that the Protestant Reformation, because it removed some, but not all Roman error, as well as introducing its own doctrinal innovations, had resulted in further divisions within the Church. Liberal Protestant efforts such as the Grindelwald Conferences sought further reform, but, in Vilatte's mind, this was a continuation of the earlier failure of the Reformation, one which widened the divide and carried the faithful even farther away from Catholic unity and closer to irreligion. Likewise, the Anglican Church's compromise between Catholic and Reform identity was unworkable for Vilatte because the two theologies and ecclesiologies were in constant and confusing conflict, which meant that any position an Anglican body might take would be likely to compromise orthodoxy.

Vilatte recognised that the reunion project needed leadership, and though he believed that individual bishops were responsible for promoting reunion and cultivating those relationships that might build momentum for the larger church, there was still a need for an anchor point around which reunion activity might be coordinated. The Roman church, because it presented itself as the only true Catholic

Church and demanded submission and incorporation, in Vilatte's mind was not a viable partner in the effort to realise Christian reunion, indeed he gives every impression that he believed that Rome would be the very last Catholic church to unite with a reformed and newly unified Catholic Church. By the close of 1905, Vilatte appears to have abandoned any hope, at least for the time being, that the European Old Catholics or the Anglicans could be relied upon to lead the international effort to realise Christian reunion. The Old Catholics were not willing to proselytise outside of Europe, they were still sending mixed messages about the catholicity of the Anglicans, and individual bishops like Herzog were divisive. Vilatte by this time believed that the European Old Catholics were a spent force, and would eventually die out. The Anglicans, like the Roman Catholics, promoted themselves as the natural centre of reunion, but on terms such that other Catholic churches, rather than be treated as independent equals, were expected to accept assimilation into the Anglican church's structures and identity. Kozlowski and Grafton's attempts between 1902 and 1903 to unite Kozlowski's Polish Old Catholics with the Protestant Episcopal Church, the events surrounding the schism in India, and the Syrian Church's attempt to assert both its openness to intercommunion and its independence as the national Catholic Church of India were examples of this Anglican attitude, and were instrumental in changing Vilatte's attitude towards the Catholic Party of the Anglican Church. Towards the end of 1905 he openly expressed his disappointment that both the European Old Catholics and the Anglicans had

missed and mis-managed opportunities to demonstrate their leadership in the struggle for Christian reunion.

Vilatte's vision must not be mistaken for a conservative or romantic one. He was a thoroughgoing progressive, and believed that the church was ever in a state of reflection, reform, and renewal, but also that this process was possible only because the Christian church stood upon the firm foundation of apostolic Catholic doctrine and identity. Vilatte's vision of reunion was not to recreate an idealised past, like Lee, or even Grafton. Rather it was to call the apostolic churches to reform; for Vilatte, Catholic reform went hand in hand with Christian reunion — one naturally paved the way for the other, so that the Protestant churches would be drawn into unity with them, healing the many rifts and schisms that began when Rome, through its arrogance in 1054, knocked over the first domino. Vilatte was not hopelessly naive; he saw the challenges, he understood how deeply rooted they were, and he had no illusions that these challenges would be or could be solved quickly, but this did not diminish his optimism. In the meantime, he believed that it was the duty of all believers in Christ to pray for, and in small ways collectively to work towards, the eventual reunification of the Catholic church.



Vilatte, probably taken around 1915



## 6: Introducing Independent Catholicism to America: 19th Century Church-building in Virgin Mission Field

Late nineteenth century America provided a new mission field. Denominations recognised this unique opportunity and struggled both internally and with one another to take advantage of it. Unlike in Europe, where churches were centuries old and regional identities were tied to particular religious traditions, the mission field in the United States, particularly in new settlements, was a blank slate. This chapter draws on letters, newspaper accounts, and a surviving fundraising pamphlet published by Vilatte's Old Catholic mission in 1887 to explore relevant features of being a missionary and an immigrant organising a parish. That was Vilatte's context as the missionary who brought Old Catholicism to North America, and later, after 1892, shaped what we now call Independent Catholicism. The chapter is in three sections. The first section explores what Roman Catholic missionaries from Europe

encountered when they established themselves in newly settled regions of the United States. The second section identifies some issues that immigrants encountered in the religious environment of their new home, and how their encounter with the nascent American Roman Catholic hierarchy sometimes led to tensions and the occasional rupture. The third section deals with Vilatte's experience as an Old Catholic missionary, how he interacted with the Belgian and French settlers as he established Old Catholicism in Wisconsin between 1885 and Bishop Brown's death in 1888, how he persuaded nominally Roman Catholic immigrants to convert, and the challenges he faced as the sole representative of Old Catholic ideas active in North America. We find that Vilatte's experience as a missionary paralleled that of Roman Catholic mission priests in a number of ways, such as the hardship of daily life, the struggle to fund the work, and combatting irreligion and competition. However, his own character, his previous experience as a Protestant missionary, and his progressive Old Catholic message appealed to some immigrants who wanted to maintain their Catholicism, but whose expectations had changed with the experience of their own transition from Europe to America.

### **What Roman Catholic Missionaries Encountered<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Studies exploring Roman Catholic missions in the United States in the late nineteenth century that I found most useful for this chapter include: Brettell, 'From Catholics To Presbyterians', 285-298; Stephen M. DiGiovanni, 'The Apostolic Delegate in the United States And Immigration, 1892-1896' *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 12 (Spring 1994), 47-68; Michael E. Engh, 'From Frontera Faith To Roman Rubrics: Altering Hispanic Religious Customs In Los Angeles, 1855-1880', *U.S. Catholic*

Accounts and letters of Roman Catholic missionary clergy, such as Leopold Moczygemba who, in 1854, founded Pana Maria Polish Catholic settlement in Texas, and Adelbert Inama who along with Anthony Urbanek laboured in Wisconsin, during the second half of the nineteenth century, provide a sense not only of the difficult adjustments European priests faced living and working in virgin mission territory, but also of the religious challenges that immigrants experienced as they struggled to establish new lives in America.<sup>2</sup> Roman missionaries worked almost as

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*Historian*, 12 (Fall 1994), 85-105; Thomas J. Shelley, 'Keeping The Immigrant Church Catholic: Some Reflections on Dr. Jon Butler's Lecture', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 22 (Spring 2004), 63-79; Leslie Woodcock Tentler, "'How I Would Save Them All': Priests On The Michigan Frontier", *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 12 (Fall 1994), 17-35. The following were particularly useful in writing this section because they provided first hand accounts of missions and settings chronologically and geographically close to what Vilatte himself would have experienced. A four part series in *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* of the letters of Roman Catholic missionary clergy describing their observations: Adelbert Inama, 'Letters of the Reverend Adelbert Inama, O. Praem', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 11 (September 1927), 77-95; Adelbert Inama, Agoston Haraszthy and Johann Martin, 'Letters of the Reverend Adelbert Inama, O. Praem (Continued)', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 11 (March 1928), 328-354; Adelbert Inama, 'Letters of the Reverend Adelbert Inama, O. Praem (Continued)', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 11 (June 1928), 437-458; Adelbert Inama, 'Letters of the Reverend Adelbert Inama, O. Praem (Continued)', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 12 (September 1928), 58-96. An account of the Polish missionary priest Leopold Moczygemba: Lindsay T. Baker, 'The Reverend Leopold Moczygemba, Patriarch of Polonia', *Polish American Studies*, 41 (Spring 1984), 66-109. An account of the religious setting of urban immigrants: Bruce C. Nelson, 'Revival And Upheaval: Irreligion, And Chicago's Working Class in 1886', *Journal of Social History*, 25 (Winter 1991), 233-253.

<sup>2</sup> Studies exploring Roman Catholic missions in the United States in the late nineteenth century that I found most useful for this chapter include: Brettell, 'From Catholics To Presbyterians', 285-298; Stephen M. DiGiovanni, 'The Apostolic Delegate in the United States And Immigration, 1892-1896' *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 12 (Spring 1994), 47-68; Michael E. Engh, 'From Frontera Faith To Roman Rubrics:

hard to fund their missions as they did in the mission field itself. To do so required regular fundraising tours of European cities, and a constant stream of letters updating donors on the state of the work. Many immigrants brought with them attitudes to religious adherence that ranged from apathy to outright irreligion; attitudes that were seeded in Europe, but which could flourish in America, especially in areas of new settlement where the church was either absent or represented only by the alien Catholicism of another ethnic group. Roman Catholic missionaries set out to call the irreligious back to active participation in the church. They also had to compete with other denominations; not just with one or two Protestant traditions as they might have done in Europe, but the multitude of

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Altering Hispanic Religious Customs In Los Angeles, 1855-1880', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 12 (Fall 1994), 85-105; Thomas J. Shelley, 'Keeping The Immigrant Church Catholic: Some Reflections on Dr. Jon Butler's Lecture', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 22 (Spring 2004), 63-79; Leslie Woodcock Tentler, "'How I Would Save Them All': Priests On The Michigan Frontier", *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 12 (Fall 1994), 17-35. The following were particularly useful in writing this section because they provided first hand accounts of missions and settings chronologically and geographically close to what Vilatte himself would have experienced. A four part series in *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* of the letters of Roman Catholic missionary clergy describing their observations: Adelbert Inama, 'Letters of the Reverend Adelbert Inama, O. Praem', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 11 (September 1927), 77-95; Adelbert Inama, Agoston Haraszthy and Johann Martin, 'Letters of the Reverend Adelbert Inama, O. Praem (Continued)', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 11 (March 1928), 328-354; Adelbert Inama, 'Letters of the Reverend Adelbert Inama, O. Praem (Continued)', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 11 (June 1928), 437-458; Adelbert Inama, 'Letters of the Reverend Adelbert Inama, O. Praem (Continued)', *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 12 (September 1928), 58-96. An account of the Polish missionary priest Leopold Moczygamba: Lindsay T. Baker, 'The Reverend Leopold Moczygamba, Patriarch of Polonia', *Polish American Studies*, 41 (Spring 1984), 66-109. An account of the religious setting of urban immigrants: Bruce C. Nelson, 'Revival And Upheaval: Irreligion, And Chicago's Working Class in 1886', *Journal of Social History*, 25 (Winter 1991), 233-253.

Protestant sects that had sprouted on the American religious scene during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the not-so-Christian sects such as Spiritualists. Their encounter with the American mission field sets the scene for Vilatte's work in the 1880s, and helps us understand how he was better placed than some to handle these challenges.

Immigrants were not, as a whole, as religious as church authorities would have liked. Monsignor Richard Burtzell of New York writing in 1865 described many Irish immigrants as Catholic, 'merely because Catholicity was the religion of the land of their birth.'<sup>3</sup> Indifference among Italian immigrants was cause for alarm at Rome and among American bishops.<sup>4</sup> Italian unification, and the Paris Commune, fed anti-clericalism and irreligion amongst Italian and French immigrants.<sup>5</sup> While American bishops and priests struggled to combat the loss of Catholic faithful amongst immigrants, Vatican officials recognised that 'most' immigrants from Roman Catholic regions of Europe were not exemplary Catholics.<sup>6</sup> Immigrants whose Catholicism was not as sound as bishops and priests would have liked found their Catholicism further strained by demands for regular participation, and expectations of relatively heavy financial commitments to the running and upkeep of a parish

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<sup>3</sup> Shelley, 'Keeping The Immigrant Church Catholic', p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> DiGiovanni, 'Apostolic Delegate', p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Shelley, 'Keeping The Immigrant Church Catholic', p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> Dale Light, 'The Reformation of Philadelphia Catholicism', *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 112 (July 1988), 375-405 (p. 381).

(where one existed).<sup>7</sup> Whereas in Europe their indifference might simply have amounted to taking the church for granted, the demands of a North American parish could turn it into true irreligion.<sup>8</sup>

In Europe the church was always there. Indifference was not necessarily perceived as an active rejection of one's faith. However, in the United States the situation was very different - the church was not always there; it was neither organised nor established. The religious context of Chicago provides a convenient example here, because not only was it in the same region as Vilatte was working, he lived and worked in the city itself at times throughout his archiepiscopal career. The rate of immigration in areas like Chicago in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century outstripped that of church planting.<sup>9</sup> To complicate matters, many immigrants brought with them their indifference and hostility towards religion. According to the 1890 census 43% of Chicago's population had no religious affiliation.<sup>10</sup> The sole Italian parish at that time had a roster of 3000 members out of a population of over 13000 Italian immigrants.<sup>11</sup> Irreligion was not only becoming respectable, it was becoming a family tradition, and in some cases organised, as with The Congregation

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<sup>7</sup> James J. Divita, 'The Indiana Churches And The Italian Immigrant, 1890-1935', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 6 (Fall 1987), 325-349 (pp. 326 - 327).

<sup>8</sup> Divita, 'Indiana Churches', p. 326.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson, 'Revival And Upheaval', p. 233.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson, 'Revival And Upheaval', p. 235.

<sup>11</sup> Nelson, 'Revival And Upheaval', p. 235.

of Bohemian Freethinkers of Chicago.<sup>12</sup> Turn of the century Roman Catholic missionaries struggled to recall lost sheep from various shades of irreligion while at the same time competing with the many American sects for new converts.

Priests were just as scarce as officially organised 'territorial' parishes in nineteenth century America. In 1815, the diocese of Boston, which included the whole of New England, had only three resident priests, including Bishop Ceverus, and a growing French-Canadian Roman Catholic population desperate for priests.<sup>13</sup> Francis Kenrick, then Bishop of Philadelphia, noted in his visitation for 1830 how a congregation in Pottsville, eastern Pennsylvania, 'seems large enough to support a resident priest; though at the present time it is visit[ed] only once a month, or even less frequently'.<sup>14</sup> Kenrick lamented that for a population of some two thousand working Roman Catholic men (and their families), 'in this whole region as far as the boundaries of the state of New York . . . there is not one priest'.<sup>15</sup> By mid-century, Roman Catholic settlements expanded into the mid-west and west of the United States faster than priests could easily be provided. Only 45 priests ministered to a Roman Catholic population of about 50,000 in Michigan in 1860, a situation made

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<sup>12</sup> Nelson, 'Revival And Upheaval', pp. 238, 240.

<sup>13</sup> Mason Wade, 'The French Parish And Survivance in Nineteenth-Century New England', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 36 (July 1950), 163-189 (p. 165).

<sup>14</sup> *Diary And Visitation Record Of The Rt. Rev. Francis Patrick Kenrick Administrator And Bishop Of Philadelphia 1830-1851 Later Archbishop of Baltimore*, ed. by Francis Edward Tourscher (Lancaster: Wickersham Print Co., 1916), p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> *Diary And Visitation Record*, p. 33.

more challenging due to the variety of ethnicities, languages, and national Catholicisms.<sup>16</sup> Bishop Lefevre, bishop of Detroit, noted that many of the faithful had not seen a priest in years.<sup>17</sup> Vilatte's own account from the early 1880s confirmed that Lefevre's earlier report was still true.<sup>18</sup> There were few native ordinands, and it was difficult to attract priests from Europe willing to work in the harsh conditions of the American frontier. Fr. Anthony Urbanek, working in the diocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, wrote to the Archbishop of Vienna in 1853 that only seven years earlier 'German and Irish Catholics were scattered here and there throughout the vast area of the diocese without resident priests, and were at best remembered at the annual or semi-annual visits of some priest; and where a priest established a residence, his stay was only temporary.'<sup>19</sup> Urbanek was elated that, at the time of writing, there were 64 priests working in the diocese, and there would have been 80, he added, if it were not for a cholera epidemic.<sup>20</sup> Though Roman Catholic missionaries worked hard to fill the need, both the rate of immigration and the wide distribution of new settlements made it difficult for missionary societies and the American hierarchy to effectively respond. As a result pastoral services for Roman Catholics were inconsistent if they existed at all, and families which might otherwise have been

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<sup>16</sup> Tentler, 'How I Would Save Them All', p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Tentler, 'How I Would Save Them All', p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> John Martin Henni and Anthony Urbanek, 'Letters Of The Right Reverend John Martin Henni And The Reverend Anthony Urbanek', *The Wisconsin Magazine Of History*, 10 (September 1926), 66-94 (p. 84).

<sup>20</sup> Henni, 'Letters', p. 84.



practising their faith fell away from the church altogether.<sup>21</sup> This provided Vilatte with an opportunity to establish Old Catholicism in the Belgian settlements around Green Bay in 1885.

A missionary not only had to be theologically and pastorally prepared, he also needed a strong physical, mental and emotional constitution to cope with the isolation, hardship, and dangers of late nineteenth century missionary life. Crop failure and the boom and bust of mining and forest economies could result in a loss of morale, and even of the congregation.<sup>22</sup> Travelling from one mission site to another was perhaps more of an adventure than many European clergy were accustomed to. Fr. Anthony Müller, a companion of Fr. Leopold Moczygemba, noted the danger not only from 'serpents, tarantulas, etc.,' but also of attacks from Indians in the regions bordering his parish. 'To give the Last Sacrament I must often travel 45 miles with the greatest haste. Then the woods and prairies are my dormitory.'<sup>23</sup> Fr. Anthony Urbanek reported to the Archbishop of Vienna in 1853 that shortly after establishing a settlement of monastics about two hours walk from Milwaukee, the founders, two priests from Augsburg, succumbed to cholera. 'God had granted sufficient time to establish the convent, to bless the chapel and God's acre, when

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<sup>21</sup> *Diary And Visitation Record*, p. 149

<sup>22</sup> Leonard, 'Presbyterian And Congregational Missionaries In Early Wisconsin', p. 270; Baker, 'Patriarch of Polonia', pp. 78-80; Brettell, 'From Catholics To Presbyterians', p. 290.

<sup>23</sup> Baker, 'Patriarch of Polonia', p. 72.

after a few weeks interval they were the first to be buried therein.’<sup>24</sup> Isolation, financial hardship, illness, and dangerous wildlife were enough to instil low morale and ill health. These one could expect, even to an extent prepare for, but being shot at by your own congregation was also a possibility, and one that occurred more often than one might think.<sup>25</sup> Being a missionary on the edges of settled nineteenth century America was not for the faint of heart.

Nineteenth century missionary clergy also struggled to financially support their work. Martin Henni, Roman Catholic bishop of Milwaukee, like other Roman Catholic priests and bishops, toured Europe raising funds for the support of missions and seminaries in the United States.<sup>26</sup> Fr. Leopold Moczygemba began his missionary career in Texas responding to Bishop Odin of Galveston’s appeal for funds and missionary priests in 1852.<sup>27</sup> Moczygemba travelled throughout the North East and Mid-West, including Chicago and Milwaukee, working with Polish and German immigrant Roman Catholic communities until his death in Michigan in 1891. Moczygemba made regular appeals to European sources for funds to maintain and expand the Polish oriented missionary effort in the United States. Fundraising did not end when they returned, but had to be continuously followed up with

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<sup>24</sup> Henni, ‘Letters’, pp. 88-9.

<sup>25</sup> See below for one example directly linked to Vilatte and Kaminski.

<sup>26</sup> Henni, ‘Letters’, p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> Baker, ‘Patriarch of Polonia’, p. 70.

correspondence reminding their benefactors of the work their funds supported, and soliciting continued donations. Henni, in a letter to the Archbishop of Vienna in 1850, described the purpose of his writing: 'to proffer to your Grace my deepest respects, and also to describe briefly for you the progress and future needs of my extensive diocese, which is as yet in its infancy. In doing this, I am not unmindful of your generous support in the past, and of the kindness and hospitality shown me during my last visit in Vienna.'<sup>28</sup> Fundraising tours of Europe and the urban centres of the East Coast meant that Roman Catholic missionaries could be absent from their congregations for extended periods. This, combined with the wide distribution of mission posts in a given missionary's territory and the shortage of clergy added to the strain of providing consistent religious services.

Religious pluralism in the United States was another challenge for Roman Catholic missionary clergy, drawing nominally Roman Catholic immigrants away from the church. Bishop Henni reported to the Archbishop of Vienna and the Leopoldine Society in 1851, that in Milwaukee: 'There are about twenty churches and houses of prayer. . . belonging to different denominations, such as the Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Evangelicals, Bible Christians, etc. etc. etc.'<sup>29</sup> The variety of sects, many of purely American origin, competed with one another for

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<sup>28</sup> Henni, 'Letters', p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> Henni, 'Letters', p. 77.

converts. Protestant missionaries, such as the Methodists<sup>30</sup> and Presbyterians, set up missions in immigrant settlements, especially where there was no Roman Catholic priest. Vilatte, during the period when he worked as a Protestant missionary, was part of an organised inter-denominational effort to set up Protestant missions in Francophone settlements along the East Coast and in the Mid-West. Fr. Inama whilst in upstate New York lamented that the Protestants of various sects have preachers and churches, but the German Catholics, who were more numerous, 'are still in a very doubtful position as to whether they are able to maintain their own priest; while the Protestant and Masonic proselytising seriously threatens the flock.'<sup>31</sup> The editor of *Katholischen Blätter* noted that: 'Proselytising, seduction and enticements are still the chief traits in the character of this sect [Methodists], which is at present the most popular and farthest extended in America, and for that reason of greatest danger to ignorant Catholics.'<sup>32</sup> Their aim was to convert not only the adults, but even more so the children, who because they had not been raised in a Catholic culture, unlike the adult immigrants, would more easily become and remain fully Americanised and committed Protestants.<sup>33</sup> Catholic missionaries, such as Inama, Urbanek, and Henni, worried that they were falling behind the more numerous and

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<sup>30</sup> Inama, 'Letters' 1927, p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> Inama, 'Letters' September 1928, p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> Inama, 'Letters' June 1928, p. 457.

<sup>33</sup> Divita, 'Indiana Churches', p. 331.

(so they believed) better funded Protestant sects.<sup>34</sup>

Roman Catholic missionaries labouring in the American mission field therefore encountered a number of challenges, in addition to the physical difficulties of living and working on the edge of American expansion. Immigrant settlements were scattered across sometimes vast territories. There was neither enough money nor clergy to meet the need of multi-ethnic immigrant Catholicism. Many immigrants were not as religious as missionaries would have liked either because of ideas planted in Europe before they emigrated, or because their own struggle to build new lives on the edge of American settlement consumed their attention. Irreligion and the draw of American sects made the Roman missionaries' jobs more difficult. Where immigrants organised their own church, however, missionary clergy sometimes found themselves caught in a clash between the demands of the nascent American Roman Catholic hierarchy and the expectations of the immigrant parishioners influenced by both their exposure to other ecclesial models, and to American ideals of liberty and democracy. It is this clash which we now explore, as it sets the stage for Vilatte's establishment of the Old Catholic mission in Wisconsin in 1885.

### **What Immigrants Experienced: the American Religious Scene and Roman**

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<sup>34</sup> Inama, 'Letters' September 1928, pp. 59, 87. Inama proposed a German Bureau of Missions which would fund mission activity, and source priests, as well as prepare immigrants before they left Europe.

## Catholic Hierarchy

Immigrants were confronted with a very different religious environment from that they had been accustomed to. In Europe the church was ever present, and had been for many generations. In the United States the church was neither state sponsored, nor, in many places at that time, already established. Church building and organising had to be started from scratch. The mix of ethnicities in larger settlements<sup>35</sup> and urban areas, such as Baltimore and Philadelphia, meant that many immigrants encountered other national Catholicisms for the first time. Naturally many immigrant Catholics preferred to gravitate towards churches of their own national Catholicism. The multitude of sects and denominations in nineteenth century North America allowed immigrant church organisers to see, and be influenced by, other organisational designs not in keeping with official Roman Catholic positions on the relationship between clerical authority and the laity.<sup>36</sup> The results, such as immigrants' demands for a say in church affairs, brought immigrant Roman Catholics into conflict not only with official ecclesiology, but also with the vision of the American Roman Catholic bishops for conformity and strict obedience to ultramontane Romanism. At the same time, some immigrant communities, mindful of their experiences of European policies such as *Kulturkampf*, and their observations of more independent minded Protestant congregations chafed at the

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<sup>35</sup> *Diary And Visitation Record*, pp. 95, 116.

<sup>36</sup> *Diary And Visitation Record*, p. 96.

authoritarian approaches of the largely Anglo-Irish bishops.<sup>37</sup> The riot at St. Paul's Roman Catholic church in Omaha in March 1895 (described below) is a good example of how the conflicting expectations of immigrant Catholic communities and the American bishops erupted. The issues and scenes of the St. Paul's riot were repeated in immigrant Roman Catholic parishes across the country during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some congregations held their ground, as with the parish of St. Louis, in New York,<sup>38</sup> but others, after a period of resistance, reached a settlement with the hierarchy, often with the help of a third party mediator.<sup>39</sup> Some parishes took their cases all the way to Rome.<sup>40</sup> Two key issues are relevant for our purpose: lay empowerment, i.e., demands for a lay voice and a role in the decision making of the church; and cultural preservation. The example of St. Paul's, Omaha, is also useful because, between 1893 and Kaminski's death in 1911, some Polish Catholics in particular tried to organise themselves under Vilatte's leadership and vision of Catholic reform.

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas W. Spalding, 'German Parishes East And West', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 14 (Spring 1996), 37-52 (p. 47); Henni, 'Letters', p. 69.

<sup>38</sup> Andrew P. Yox, 'The Parochial Context Of Trusteeism: Buffalo's St. Louis Church, 1828-1855', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 76 (October 1990), 712-733.

<sup>39</sup> Alfred G. Stritch, 'Trusteeism In The Old Northwest, 1800-1850', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 30 (July 1944), 155-164 (pp. 159-160).

<sup>40</sup> Yox, 'Parochial Context', p. 729; Stritch, 'Trusteeism In The Old Northwest', p. 162; Robert F. McNamara, 'Trusteeism In The Atlantic States, 1785-1863', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 30 (July 1944), 135-154 (p. 144); Patrick W. Carey, 'American Lay Catholic Views Of The Papacy, 1785-1860', *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae*, 21 (1983), 105-130 (p. 107).

On Tuesday morning 12 March 1895 a mob of about forty persons armed with rifles, rocks, knives, clubs and axes stormed St. Paul's Polish Roman Catholic parish in Omaha, Nebraska.<sup>41</sup> The mob beat and stabbed Joseph Inda at the door.<sup>42</sup> Joseph Nowicki, who led the mob into the church, levelled his gun at Fr. Stephen Kaminski and opened fire, missing the priest.<sup>43</sup> Kaminski produced two revolvers and returned fire. The fusillade lasted some time:<sup>44</sup> Kaminski emptied all but one of his bullets into the church, shooting one man through the leg, and grazing another's knee.<sup>45</sup> A statue of Mary was also 'wounded'. When the police arrived they had to fight their way through the mob surrounding the church.<sup>46</sup> Kaminski and his supporters were charged with contempt of court, and in the case of the priest, assault (shooting) with intent to kill.<sup>47</sup> The following day, according to one report, partisans from both groups assembled in 'different saloons' recounting the previous day's fracas.<sup>48</sup> The congregation had been torn apart by a two-year legal battle with the

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<sup>41</sup> 'Battle In Church', *Saint Paul Globe*, 13 March 1895, p. 8. This report states that the mob were former parishioners ousted by Bishop Scannell, in fact they represented the bishop's side. See for example: 'Battle After Mass', *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 March 1895, 1-2, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> 'Battle After Mass', *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 March 1895, 1-2, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> 'Battle After Mass', *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 March 1895, 1-2, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> 'Battle In Church', *Saint Paul Globe*, 13 March 1895, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> 'Battle After Mass', *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 March 1895, 1-2, p. 2; 'Battle In Church', *Saint Paul Globe*, 13 March 1895, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> 'Bloodshed In A Church', *The Record-Union*, 13 March 1895, p. 1; 'Battle In Church', *Saint Paul Globe*, 13 March 1895, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> 'Battle In Church', *Saint Paul Globe*, 13 March 1895, p. 8; 'Church Garrisoned', *Saint Paul Globe*, 14 March 1895, p. 8; 'Battle After Mass', *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 March 1895, 1-2, p. 2; 'Assaulted In The Pulpit', *Los Angeles Herald*, 13 March 1895, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> 'Church Garrisoned', *Saint Paul Globe*, 14 March 1895, p. 8.



Irish born Roman Catholic bishop Richard Scannell. The invading mob supported Scannell, and the members in possession of the church, led by Inda and Kaminski demanded, among other things, that the congregation ought to have a say in who should hold the title to the property, and who should be their priest because they had organised, built and paid for the church.<sup>49</sup> Their group elected Kaminski, and successfully petitioned Vilatte to ordain him.<sup>50</sup> The St. Paul's riot was the culmination of a long confrontation, and made news all over the country. It is representative of clashes between the expectations of some Roman Catholic immigrants and the American bishops.

European Roman Catholics were accustomed to the local parish having been established and maintained by a noble or gentry patron, or by the state.<sup>51</sup> The task of organising, building, and maintaining a new parish in America<sup>52</sup> often meant that immigrants had to adapt and think differently about their relationship to the local parish. The laity took charge of the situation, organised themselves, and in order to incorporate in their state elected trustees who commissioned contracts for the parish.

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<sup>49</sup> 'Assulted in the Pulpit', *Los Angeles Herald*, 13 March 1895, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> 'Villatti [sic] Ordained Him', *Detroit Free Press*, 26 August 1894, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Leslie Woodcock Tentler, 'Who Is The Church? Conflict In A Polish Immigrant Parish In Late Nineteenth-Century Detroit', *Comparative Studies In Society And History*, 25 (April 1983), 241-276 (p. 256); Patrick Carey, 'The Laity's Understanding Of The Trustee System, 1785-1855', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 64 (July 1978), 357-376 (p. 371).

<sup>52</sup> Stritch, 'Trusteeism In The Old Northwest', pp. 156-157.

This was sometimes done without any clerical oversight or permission and became known as trusteeism.<sup>53</sup> After the initial costs that covered the purchase of land, building the church, establishing a cemetery, and sometimes building a separate school, the parishioners had to ensure consistent funding to service or pay down any debts, maintain the buildings, pay teachers and support a priest. They did this through regular assessments or subscriptions, as well as social fundraising events. Some religious services were provided at a fee.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes there was an available bishop and the organising committee would seek permission to establish a new parish.<sup>55</sup> When they did so, the laity were not afraid to assert their expectations of the bishop's role in their parish.<sup>56</sup> Their very personal involvement in the organising, construction, and maintenance of their parish cultivated a strong sense of ownership over their church and gave rise to increasing calls for involvement in ecclesial matters.

Trusteeism evolved beyond mere practical management of parish affairs into something of a movement campaigning for a democratic Roman Catholicism in the

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<sup>53</sup> Light, 'Reformation of Philadelphia Catholicism', p. 382; Carey, 'Laity's Understanding' p. 363; Tentler, 'Who Is The Church?', p. 247; Yox, 'Parochial Context', p. 719.

<sup>54</sup> June Granatir Alexander, 'The Laity In The Church: Slovaks And The Catholic Church In Pre-World War I Pittsburgh', *Church History*, 53 (September 1984), 363-378 (p. 370).

<sup>55</sup> Alexander, 'Laity In The Church', p. 369.

<sup>56</sup> Alexander, 'Laity In The Church', p. 369.

United States. The demand that a local parish, like its Protestant neighbours, ought to be able to choose its own priest extended to broader arguments about the shape and governance of the American Church. Lay trusteeists such as Mathew Carey of St. Mary's parish, Philadelphia argued around 1820 that: a 'different order of things prevails in this country . . . The opinions and wishes of the people require to be consulted to a degree unknown in Europe.'<sup>57</sup> Dr. John Fernandez, a trustee in Norfolk, Virginia, proposed that the laity ought to have an organised synod of their own, where they would participate in the selection of American bishops.<sup>58</sup> Some clerical voices also supported democratic reform within the church. Richard Burtzell, a priest in New York in the latter half of the century, believed that the direction and governance of the American church ought to be determined through the participation of the laity.<sup>59</sup> Influenced by the American political separation of powers, trustees even argued for the separation of powers within the church. Laity ought to manage the church's temporal affairs. Clerical authority should be restricted to spiritual concerns.<sup>60</sup> Taken as a reform movement, trusteeism sought to bring an entirely different ecclesial model to bear on Roman Catholicism, one infused with and inspired by American democratic ideals — one that stood in

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<sup>57</sup> Light, 'Reformation of Philadelphia Catholicism', p. 384.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick W. Carey, 'Republicanism Within American Catholicism', *Journal Of The Early Republic*, 3 (Winter 1983), 413-437 (p. 419).

<sup>59</sup> Robert Emmett Curran, 'Prelude to "Americanism": The New York Academia And Clerical Radicalism In The Late Nineteenth Century', *Church History*, 47 (March 1978), 48-65 (pp. 52, 63).

<sup>60</sup> Carey, 'Laity's Understanding', p. 367.

opposition to the institutionalism and ultramontanism of the nineteenth century Roman Catholic hierarchy.

The Church, according to bishops such as Detroit's Caspar Borgess and John Foley, while functioning in a republic within the United States, was not a democratic institution.<sup>61</sup> The bishops believed that campaigns to democratise the church so as to bring it into conformity with American republican values were a Protestant innovation. Bishop Meréchal, writing to the Propaganda in 1818, complained: 'Catholics living in their [Protestant] society are evidently exposed to the danger of admitting the same principles of ecclesiastical rule, and by the artifices of impious priests, who cater to their pride, are easily led to believe they have the right to elect and dismiss their pastors as they please.'<sup>62</sup> The laity had no authority within the nineteenth century Roman Catholic Church; their role was to obey the bishops and to receive ministry. Those who advocated democratic reform within the church were not, according to the bishops, true Roman Catholics, as they were trying to undermine the divinely instituted authority of the episcopate.<sup>63</sup> American bishops attacked trustees, especially those who campaigned for democratisation, and for parish laity to retain a voice in decision making. A parish could not be a Roman Catholic parish without handing over the parish deeds and submitting to the

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<sup>61</sup> Tentler, 'Who Is The Church?', pp. 247-248.

<sup>62</sup> McNamara, 'Trusteeism In The Atlantic States', p. 154.

<sup>63</sup> Light, 'Reformation of Philadelphia Catholicism', p. 382.

bishop's authority. Trustees must be appointed by the bishop or abolished. Only under these conditions, so believed the American episcopate, could bishops guarantee that they could carry out their work unfettered by the constraints of lay authority.

It was not just democracy and the ideas of other American sects that immigrants encountered. They also clashed with the American Roman bishops' plan to shape the American Roman Catholic Church. Inspired by the blank canvas of the American mission field, unencumbered by the complexities of centuries of vested interests and regional Catholicisms, the American bishops set out to make the American church representative of the reforms of Vatican I. This meant enforcing a strict territorial parish system, restricting or abolishing national parishes. The bishops undertook a programme of Americanisation in an effort to counter anti-Catholic feeling in the United States. Both of these aims met with resistance and resentment especially from Central European immigrants fleeing *Kulturkampf* and Magyarisation. This clash was certainly at play in the St. Paul's riot. Not only did the congregation want a say in the affairs of their church, but they wanted to maintain its Polish character, and Kaminski encouraged that conviction by celebrating the liturgy in Polish rather than Latin.

Standardising ritual and devotional activity was an important part of the

American bishops' programme of establishing institutional control over the Roman church in the United States, and making the church and its members 'American'.<sup>64</sup> In California, where Spanish missionaries had earlier encouraged devotions of local colour, Bishop Amat, following the decisions of bishops' councils, sought to eradicate them, and 'bring them into closer conformity with the American Church.'<sup>65</sup> Bishop Kenrick repeatedly chastised and threatened to sanction parishes which continued regional customs, such as singing German hymns rather than officially sanctioned Latin ones. Thus, at least while he was present, 'the Mass was celebrated in silence.'<sup>66</sup> Germans, noted Kenrick, 'are very tenacious of their customs, [and] did not heartily approve this my action.'<sup>67</sup> The irony of course is that a silent Mass, being the Irish custom, matched well with Kenrick's own ethnic Catholicism.<sup>68</sup> In the spring of 1834 he appointed Francis Masquelet to a parish in Pittsburgh because he spoke German, but Kenrick noted in his diary that 'The church is not, however, to be considered, therefore, a church of the Germans.'<sup>69</sup> The bishops believed that their plan would not only consolidate the hierarchy's hold over the many diverse ethnic Roman Catholics in the United States, but that strict adherence to the reformed Roman ritual was an important step towards Americanising the Roman Church,

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<sup>64</sup> Light, 'Reformation of Philadelphia Catholicism', p. 383.

<sup>65</sup> Engh, 'From Frontera Faith To Roman Rubrics', pp. 86-87.

<sup>66</sup> *Diary And Visitation Record*, p. 215.

<sup>67</sup> *Diary And Visitation Record*, p. 215.

<sup>68</sup> Shelley, 'Keeping The Immigrant Church Catholic', p. 72.

<sup>69</sup> *Diary And Visitation Record*, p. 90.

making it look and feel less foreign to the wider American public. Immigrant communities, however, grew to resent the bishops' interference in their traditional Catholicisms. For many this was seen as an attempt at making them 'Irish' that fed their demands for national Catholic priests who spoke their language and understood their regional Catholicism.

Austrian-born Fr. Inama described the situation in 1844 in relation to this programme. The 'chief difficulty of the German missionaries here arose from their relation to the Irish bishops. These naturally desire to anglicise the German settlers, so as to be able to do without German missionaries... Besides, it is impossible to fuse the two nationalities into one.'<sup>70</sup> The experience of Slovak immigrants in 1880s Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, exemplifies Inama's observation. With no Slovak national parish to go to, they tried to attend a largely Irish territorial parish 'but were rejected by the icy stares of the locals and the occasional stones thrown at them after Mass'.<sup>71</sup> Italians found the Irish style of celebrating Mass as barren as a Protestant service.<sup>72</sup> The Irish on the other hand viewed Italian devotions 'as little better than superstition'.<sup>73</sup> Immigrants sought to continue their particular national Catholicism

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<sup>70</sup> Inama, 'Letters' March 1928, p. 332.

<sup>71</sup> Stolarik, M. Mark, 'Slovak Immigrants Come to Terms with Religious Diversity in North America', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 96 (January 2010), 56-84 (p. 59).

<sup>72</sup> Shelley, 'Keeping The Immigrant Church Catholic', p. 72.

<sup>73</sup> Shelley, 'Keeping The Immigrant Church Catholic', p. 72.

tightly linked to their language and culture.<sup>74</sup> Living in the United States was perhaps the first time that many immigrants experienced different 'Catholicisms', and the clash of customs, language, and even liturgical calendars created tensions between ethnic Catholic communities, as well as between immigrant Catholics and their American bishops.

Culture clashes were not the only contributing factor. Many immigrants, especially those from Central Europe, were fleeing the effects of government-enforced enculturation. Polish immigration was a product of Bismark's *Kulturkampf*, the de-polonisation of German held areas of Poland which began in earnest in 1872. In these areas, Polish was discouraged, newspapers had to be printed in German, and even postal addresses were germanised.<sup>75</sup> German government efforts to germanise the Polish population targeted local clergy. They were deemed to be encouraging and supporting clandestine efforts to maintain Polish language and culture.<sup>76</sup> German Catholics also were not immune to the effects of *Kulturkampf* and priests and bishops were imprisoned or sent into exile, and some no doubt emigrated voluntarily to America.<sup>77</sup> It was not just Poles who emigrated under

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<sup>74</sup> Jay P. Dolan, 'Immigrants In The City: New York's Irish And German Catholics', *Church History*, 41 (September 1972), 354-368 (p. 360).

<sup>75</sup> James S. Pula, 'Polish-American Catholicism: A Case Study In Cultural Determination', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 27 (Summer 2009), 1-19 (p. 3).

<sup>76</sup> Pula, 'Polish-American Catholicism', p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Margaret Livinia Anderson, 'The Limits Of Secularization: On The Problem Of The Catholic Revival In Nineteenth-Century Germany', *The Historical Journal*, 38 (September 1995), 647-670 (p. 666).



pressure to maintain their language and culture; Slovaks did so too. A book published between 1900 and 1910 to help Slovak immigrants master English includes a sample dialogue which explores a possible answer to ‘why do the Slovaks emigrate to the United States in such great numbers?’; and encapsulates the feeling of immigrants faced with Irish bishops forcibly stripping their parishes of their ethnic character.<sup>78</sup> The answer describes how the government refused to educate Slovaks ‘in the language intelligible to them’ and pressed on with a Magyarisation of Slovaks.<sup>79</sup> ‘The Magyar government persecutes every honest Slovak who upholds the cause of his language and nationality. Even small children were torn away from their mother’s arms by gendarmes and dragged to Magyar lands for the purpose of learning Magyar and forgetting Slovak.’<sup>80</sup> While immigrants wanted their children educated in English, and well accustomed to American ways, they were not willing to also surrender their ethnic identities. They frequently linked the preservation of their language and culture with the preservation of their national Catholicism. Their prior experiences of *Kulturkampf* or Magyarisation for some intensified their desire to maintain their national Catholic practice in the United States, not only in opposition to other regional European Catholicisms, but also in opposition to the Americanisation programme of the American Roman Catholic bishops.

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<sup>78</sup> Paul K. Kadak, *Praktičny Slovensko-Anglicky Tlumač* (Winnipeg: F. Dojaček, n.d.) p. 92.

<sup>79</sup> *Praktičny Slovensko-Anglicky Tlumač*, p. 93.

<sup>80</sup> *Praktičny Slovensko-Anglicky Tlumač*, p. 94.

Losing the second court case against Bishop Scannell ignited the tensions in Omaha caused by these two sets of issues, trustees' control and cultural preservation. The two court cases decided who had the right to the deed granting ownership of the parish church. The trustees refused to give it to Bishop Scannell, and instead entrusted the deed to Vicar General Vilen Choka.<sup>81</sup> Choka was Bohemian, a fellow Slav, and a high ranking Roman Catholic priest. The parishioners did not deny that the property belonged to the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>82</sup> However, they wanted to be heard, and they understood that by giving the deed to Bishop Scannell, they would lose all of their power, and no longer be able to influence events within their own parish. 'They claim,' reported *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 'that they are the victims of a conspiracy which, if it is successful, will defraud them of their rights, and under the circumstances they are not willing that the affairs of the church shall be administered without their having a voice in it.'<sup>83</sup> Bishop Scannell removed the previous priest against the wishes of the congregation. Kaminski argued that as Scannell did not hold the deed to the church, he had no authority to replace the priest without the congregation's consent.<sup>84</sup> The immigrant community having organised, funded, and built the church, the experience of having done so instilled in them a strong sense of ownership, which they were willing to take

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<sup>81</sup> 'Battle After Mass', *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 March 1895, 1-2, p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> 'Battle After Mass', *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 March 1895, 1-2, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> 'Battle After Mass', *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 March 1895, 1-2, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> 'Battle After Mass', *The Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 March 1895, 1-2, p. 2.

extraordinary measures to defend, as demonstrated by the events at St. Paul's.

The parishioners at St. Paul's needed a priest during the difficulties between the parish and Bishop Scannell; they elected Stephen Kaminski and sent him to be ordained by Vilatte the year before the gunfight in the church. It is curious that the congregation did not see themselves as a parish of Vilatte's. Indeed, Kaminski repeatedly told reporters that it was a Roman Catholic parish, and that once the parishioners' rights were honoured, he would step aside. Later, in 1897, Kaminski would be elected bishop by the Polish Independent Catholic contingent under Vilatte's leadership. Kaminski's service was an alternative to that imposed by a bishop possibly deemed an outsider and resented by the congregation. The strife at St. Paul's came to a close in just as violent a manner as it began, with the church burned to the ground, and Kaminsky and his police protection fleeing for their lives.<sup>85</sup> The church was never rebuilt, and the issue over ownership and management of the parish became a moot point.

The American environment that nineteenth century immigrants encountered changed their attitudes about what to expect from their church, and what their role in the church ought to be. The experience of organising their own parishes independent of the American hierarchy not only cultivated a strong sense of ownership of their church, it also instilled a commitment to active involvement in the parish and its affairs. The laity were no longer obedient recipients of ministry

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<sup>85</sup> 'Father Kaminski Is On Trial', *Nebraska State Journal*, 5 April 1895, p. 8.

from the clergy. American ideas of democracy and liberty also contributed to immigrants' expectations that, in the United States, the church must change and the laity have a voice and an active role in its affairs. American bishops, however, saw this new attitude as un-Catholic, even heretical. Thus, the clash between immigrant expectations and episcopal demands was repeated in congregations across the United States for decades, and opened a window for Vilatte's progressive Independent Catholicism to attract the attention of disillusioned and disenfranchised immigrant Roman Catholics.

### **Vilatte: Old Catholic Missionary to America**

When Vilatte began the Old Catholic mission in 1885 he was already a seasoned missionary, albeit a Protestant one. This was perhaps the only advantage he had over newer missionaries from Europe or the East Coast. It did not, however, mean that he escaped the same challenges facing daily life in new settlements, assembling necessary resources for the mission, and overcoming impediments from the religious feelings of local immigrants. Alongside local media accounts of the origin and growth of the mission, the pamphlet *An Account of the Old Catholic Work in the Diocese of Fond du Lac* is an important source for this section, which covers the period from 1885 to Bishop Brown's death in 1888. The mission published the pamphlet in 1888 as a way of augmenting Vilatte's in person campaigns for sympathetic help and

funds for the congregation. This section is roughly organised around Vilatte's engagement with the issues covered thus far in the chapter. It describes how Vilatte managed the hardships of daily life as a sole missionary, how he managed within a year of his ordination to have built the first Old Catholic parish church in North America, and how he managed to persuade the culturally Roman Catholic Francophone immigrants in the area to convert, and call Old Catholicism their own.

Vilatte's physical presence, intellect and personality served him well as a missionary in the Belgian farming settlements of Wisconsin. Unlike the pale, delicate Grafton, Vilatte was a ruddy, tall and burly man. When he visited Grafton's parish in Boston in January of 1888, the *Boston Herald* described him as being as suited to living in a cabin, as to visiting a fine drawing room,<sup>86</sup> meaning that he had the intellect and social refinement of a gentleman, but the physical presence of a frontier labourer. A reporter for *The Freeman's Journal* in 1907 described meeting Vilatte in Rome a few years previous: 'he was rather strange looking for an ecclesiastic — indeed, he had a closer resemblance to a pugilist out on a holiday...Anyone more unlike what an Archbishop is expected to be I never saw.'<sup>87</sup> His uncharacteristic appearance aside, Vilatte was widely praised for his openness, intelligence, commitment to his people, and for his rhetorical skill. C. R. I. Crittenton wrote in *The Churchman* a description of his visit to Vilatte's mission at Christmas in 1886. Vilatte,

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<sup>86</sup> Johnson, 'Vilatte: Accidental Catalyst', 49.

<sup>87</sup> 'The World of Rome', *The Freeman's Journal*, 4 February 1907, p. 5.

he wrote, is 'devoted' to the cause, and to his people, and is 'a model of a priest and pastor. A young man of energy and dignity, culture and education, he has sacrificed his life to the cause of Old Catholic reform among a people mostly poor Belgian and French peasants'.<sup>88</sup> When Bishop Brown wrote to *The Church Eclectic* in July 1885, he described Vilatte as 'an unusually intelligent and sagacious young Frenchman'.<sup>89</sup> When he was a Presbyterian preacher and missionary, in July 1884, the Winnebago Presbytery in Wisconsin decided to ordain him after only four months of having granted him a preaching license. The report noted that he 'is said to be a very brilliant, able man, and possessed of a magnetic power of speaking which affects all his hearers, although his addresses are delivered in the French language.'<sup>90</sup> These two seemingly contrasting characteristics gave Vilatte a presence that convinced Belgian farmers and labourers that he belonged with them, and it quickly endeared him to the communities in which he was known and worked.<sup>91</sup> Crittenton, for example highlighted Vilatte's success as a pastor, pointing out that only 18 months after founding the mission, there were over 300 communicants.<sup>92</sup> The June 1898

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<sup>88</sup> C. R. I. Crittenton, "'A Visit To The Old Catholic Church'" In *The Diocese Of Fond Du Lac*, *The Churchman*, 29 January 1887, 91-92 (p. 91).

<sup>89</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 18.

<sup>90</sup> 'The Winnebago Presbytery', *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, 11 July 1884, p. 4; 'Another Benedict[ion]', *The Independent Catholic*, February 1892, p. 3; Messmer to Satolli, May 1894.

<sup>91</sup> 'Bishop Grafton's Visit', *The Independent*, 13 September 1889, p. 2; 'Catholics In Revolt', *Rochester Democrat And Chronicle*, 30 September 1894, p. 11.

<sup>92</sup> C. R. I. Crittenton, "'A Visit To The Old Catholic Church'" In *The Diocese Of Fond Du Lac*, *The Churchman*, 29 January 1887, 91-92 (p. 91).

edition of *Catholic Truth*, the parish newspaper for St. Mary's church in Buffalo, New York, reported that in eleven of fourteen parishes there were 6,455 families affiliated with the church.<sup>93</sup> Eighteen years later the 1916 *Federal Council Year Book* reported that there were 15,000 communicants, forty churches, and forty-two clergy.<sup>94</sup>

Unlike many European Roman Catholic, or East Coast trained American Protestant missionaries, Vilatte was prepared for the personal hardships of missionary life in rough settlements. When he first immigrated to Canada in 1874 he worked as a teacher and catechist in logging camps.<sup>95</sup> Between 1880 and 1884 Vilatte served as an itinerant Protestant missionary at the direction of the interdenominational French Work project. Reverend Thomas Cote, who was partly responsible for commissioning Vilatte, described him in late 1882, in the Protestant newspaper *L'Aurore*. 'Mr. René Vilatte has worked here for several months, and is highly esteemed. Our young missionary of Fall River has demonstrated a courage, an energy and a piety worthy of praise. He has laboured in the midsts of many difficulties and privations. Without a committee in charge, without salary.'<sup>96</sup> Thus, when in 1885 Vilatte began his Old Catholic mission in Little Sturgeon, Wisconsin, he

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<sup>93</sup> AT Collection, *Catholic Truth*, June 1898. The account notes that three parishes in Chicago, Detroit and Georgetown did not report back.

<sup>94</sup> H. K. Carroll, *Federal Council Year Book* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of The United States And Canada, 1917), p. 209

<sup>95</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> Thériault, *Msgr. René Vilatte*, p. 62.

entered into the project with practical experience that made missionary life less of a challenge for him than it was for many recent seminary graduates or monks from Europe.

From Vilatte's previous experience as a missionary he knew what to do, whom to approach and how, in order to quickly acquire needed resources to establish a mission project. Vilatte left behind a salary and a congregation as a Presbyterian pastor in 1885 in order to establish his Old Catholic mission. He enjoyed the moral support of Brown and others in the Episcopal diocese. No help came from the Old Catholics in Europe — who it seems paid no attention to Vilatte until after Brown's death in 1888. He was effectively on his own. For the first few months of the mission in 1885, Vilatte conducted services at the Gardner home of Alphonse Debrault.<sup>97</sup> It may be that this was the same family mentioned in *An Account of the Old Catholic Work in the Diocese of Fond du Lac* that initially begrudgingly gave him shelter upon his return from his ordination in Berne in the summer of 1885.<sup>98</sup> Only a few months after his return from Europe, in November of 1885, Vilatte had acquired enough funds to buy a forty acre plot, upon which the first Old Catholic church in the United States was built in Gardner the following summer.<sup>99</sup> During his first winter in Sturgeon Bay Vilatte lived in a single story, one room, frame building. 'On the one

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<sup>97</sup> 'Little Sturgeon', *Weekly Expositor*, 27 Nov 1885, p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 8.

<sup>99</sup> 'Little Sturgeon', *Weekly Expositor*, 27 Nov 1885, p. 2.



side was the chapel, on the other the priest's room.'<sup>100</sup> The altar was assembled out of an old kitchen door, he constructed other furniture out of old wooden boxes, barrels, carpets and hay. *An Account of the Old Catholic Work* was a pamphlet designed to promote the work of the Old Catholic mission, and to solicit funds. It is no surprise then that it publicises an image of Vilatte as the missionary willing to sacrifice his own comfort for the cause of his mission. The same pamphlet suggests further that Vilatte's first year as an Old Catholic missionary was made all the more challenging by the isolation he felt.<sup>101</sup> Other missionaries had moral support through their denominations, and sometimes companion missionaries in the field, or a fledgeling community or group to go to. Vilatte, on the other hand, was the only Old Catholic priest in North America. He began his task literally with nothing and from nothing.

Many late nineteenth century missionaries struggled to fund their work, and Vilatte was no different. Brown appealed to the Board of Missions for seed money, a \$400 stipend, to cover Vilatte's first year of the project.<sup>102</sup> The board, however, refused Brown's request. Many of the French and Belgian immigrants in the area were themselves recent arrivals and struggling to build for themselves new homes, farms and businesses. Vilatte described the situation: 'At present it is with the

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<sup>100</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 11.

<sup>102</sup> Hogue, 'Episcopal Church and Vilatte', p. 37.

greatest struggle that these families are able to provide for their first wants, and in many places we see misery get the upper hand.'<sup>103</sup> Vilatte understood that for the mission to establish itself, it needed funding from outside the community, as well as the contributions of the nascent Old Catholic congregation. During the winter months Vilatte toured the East Coast cultivating awareness of the aims of the mission and raising funds.<sup>104</sup> Vilatte sought not only money, but clothes, blankets, and books to help alleviate the hardship the immigrants experienced while working to establish themselves. Fundraising meant that Vilatte was away from the mission for months at a time. He sent regular reports on his progress back to the congregation which were published in the local papers. Only a year after Vilatte's ordination to the priesthood, on 7 June 1886, his congregation laid the cornerstone for the church of the Precious Blood, the first Old Catholic parish in the United States.<sup>105</sup> When Brown visited on 16 September of that year, the parish and the rectory were built, and nearly debt free (though Vilatte did have to sell his watch to pay the labourers) but much of the inside decoration was yet unfinished.<sup>106</sup>

Vilatte quickly found himself in the same position as many Roman Catholic

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<sup>103</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 9; Hogue, 'Episcopal Church and Vilatte', p. 39.

<sup>105</sup> 'Little Sturgeon'; *Door County Advocate*, 24 June 1886, p. 2; 'New Church', *Green Bay Weekly Gazette*, 3 July 1886, p. 3.

<sup>106</sup> 'Fond du Lac', *The Churchman*, 9 October 1866, p. 422; *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, pp. 9-10.

missionary priests — stretched too thin. Within two years of starting the Old Catholic mission, demand for a priest elsewhere outstripped Vilatte's ability to fill the gap and provide ministry. His original parish of the Precious Blood had 'about one hundred families amounting to a population of about four hundred souls'.<sup>107</sup> Immigrant Catholics in six or seven other villages in the region petitioned Vilatte for a priest.<sup>108</sup> One, already organised congregation in Red River described their feelings of abandonment by the Roman Catholic Church, and promised to 'do our very best to organize among us a true Christian Church,' if Vilatte would 'come and administer to our spiritual wants'.<sup>109</sup> When, in 1888, Bishop Brown died, there is a suggestion that elsewhere, outside of Wisconsin, other immigrant Catholics who chafed under the impositions of the American hierarchy had begun to press Vilatte for his advice and services.<sup>110</sup> Loyson recognised Vilatte's commitment to Catholic reform, and his skill as a missionary, and early in 1887 appealed to Vilatte to return to Paris for a few months to help the Old Catholics there. 'Our work — yours in America and ours in France — is a Catholic one, as was that of the Apostles, who were called from place to place, as the young churches needed them. The elements abound, but what is needed is an organiser.'<sup>111</sup> Vilatte understood that there was a narrow window of opportunity available to him in which to root the Old Catholic

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<sup>107</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 15.

<sup>108</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 17.

<sup>109</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 17.

<sup>110</sup> Brother William, *The Genesis of Old Catholicism in America*, n.d., p. 7.

<sup>111</sup> Loyson to Vilatte 6 Jan 1887, in *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, pp. 21-22.

idea in the United States before the Roman Catholics caught up with him, a point he set out before Loyson when he explained why he could not join him in Paris. “To abandon America would be the happiness of the Romans and would compromise our young church...perhaps the day will come when a man more capable and more worthy than I will take up the lead of the Old Catholic movement [in America]. Then I would be free, but for the present, to abandon America is impossible, and would be a crime.”<sup>112</sup> Vilatte still had to undertake fund-raising tours in the winter, taking him away from the mission for months at a time.<sup>113</sup> As the only Old Catholic missionary in the country Vilatte was unable to reach everywhere that sought him out. This impeded the mission’s growth, but in a desperate effort to keep up it did mean that Vilatte was stretched too thin on the ground. He desperately needed help — namely more priests.

Vilatte, like Loyson, maintained a distinction between the Old Catholics and the Episcopalians. This justified his desire for new Old Catholic clergy to be educated in an Old Catholic seminary. Vilatte needed to quickly set into motion plans to train more Old Catholic priests to serve the growing demands of the mission.<sup>114</sup> Local businessmen in Sturgeon Bay donated the land, and Ernest DeBeaumont, a former Roman Catholic priest, agreed to head the project. By the beginning of 1888, there

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<sup>112</sup> Vilatte to Loyson, n.d. 1887, in *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 22.

<sup>113</sup> ‘Old Catholic’, *The Independent*, 25 March 1887, p. 5.

<sup>114</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 17.

were 'six or seven' young men, including one already studying at Nashotah House, one studying at Racine, and a third in private instruction who were destined to be the first class of the planned seminary.<sup>115</sup> What began with intense optimism soon soured, however. Reports are not clear, but it appears that the Roman Catholic bishop instigated opposition to the Old Catholic presence almost as soon as Vilatte had chosen the site for the seminary in June of 1887.<sup>116</sup> Vilatte and DeBeaumont wrote to the group of backers in Sturgeon Bay in April 1888 to inform them that the project was to be put on hold. In their letter, published in *The Independent*, Vilatte and DeBeaumont describe how 'every one of the members of our family who have been spending the winter in this city have been publicly insulted in the streets and other places,' and express their concern that future students should feel safe from such incidents.<sup>117</sup> Such opposition would normally not deter Vilatte, and there are hints in the reports and published letters surrounding the project that the relationship between the town and the Old Catholics had become difficult. Vilatte, it seems, overreached on this occasion and made mistakes managing relations between the mission, the community and the project's backers. He wanted to cultivate an Old Catholic ethos through educating and training the mission's own priests. However, Vilatte was forced to rely on mostly former Roman Catholic clergy to meet the growing demand for Old Catholic missions. This proved to be problematic as these

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<sup>115</sup> 'The Churches', *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 28 January 1888, p. 12.

<sup>116</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 13; 'Home Happenings', *The Independent*, 17 June 1887, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> 'Can this be True?', *The Independent*, 13 April 1888, p. 2.

priests were not always committed to Catholic reform and to Vilatte's vision of Independent Catholicism.<sup>118</sup>

When Vilatte began his mission in Green Bay first as a Presbyterian minister in 1884, then after 1885 as an Old Catholic priest, he found that the factions, sects, and as he described it, 'different forms of belief' made it difficult to organise Francophone families into a congregation.<sup>119</sup> He wrote to Loyson in 1884 that many immigrants in the area had already deserted the faith.<sup>120</sup> One member of Vilatte's congregation reported that for three years none amongst his family and friends attended any religious service, nor were their children baptised.<sup>121</sup> Vilatte believed that the immigrants falling away from the faith meant that: 'The greatest ignorance, superstition, sorcery, fanaticism and shameful practices find thousands of adherents. The religion of the people consists simply in forms; the nobleness of Christian character is unknown, and the heart has not part in Christian practices.'<sup>122</sup> Brown too, believed that if there were no immediate intervention, the growing irreligion and apathy of the first generation of immigrants would lead to the next 'likely to be

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<sup>118</sup> 'The Case of the Rev. E. Proth, *The Independent*, 12 April 1889, p. 3; 'Refused His Request', *Green Bay Weekly Gazette*, 12 April 1893, p. 6; 'The Old Catholic Church: Archbishop Vilatte Explains Why Father Knowles Is Not A Bishop', *The New York Times*, 1 October 1892, p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>120</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>121</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, p. 6.

worse than themselves.<sup>123</sup> Vilatte and his Old Catholic mission were to be Brown's intervention, not only to draw the people back into the Catholic faith, but also to draw them away from Romanism. Vilatte's solution was a pastoral one, to visit families one by one, and while possibly emphasising their shared Franco-Belgian culture, asked them for the moment to set aside their sectarian beliefs in order to come together as a community.<sup>124</sup>

Immigrants in the region who remained nominally Roman Catholic were, he was convinced, thoroughly dissatisfied with their Church.<sup>125</sup> The reasons were, in reality more complex, but Vilatte and Brown recognised one feature that could be used not only to bring immigrants together to form an Old Catholic mission, also to compete with the Roman Catholic efforts to expand in Wisconsin. It was the poor behaviour of some Roman Catholic priests. 'The Roman Church' reported *The Churchman* of 7 August 1886, 'has shamefully deprived this Belgian people of the very consolations of holy religion. She has either left them destitute of spiritual fathers or else has relegated to that section of her constituency faithless priests, who have not scrupled to make traffic out of the sanctities of the Faith by putting a commercial value upon the Holy Sacraments'.<sup>126</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work* includes a number of

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<sup>123</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>124</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 5.

<sup>125</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, pp. 11, 17.

<sup>126</sup> *The Churchman*, 7 August 1886, p. 143.

examples of Roman clergy commercialising religious rites: one woman was forced to bury her child in her garden because she did not have the money demanded by the priest; another priest rejected a gift from godparents for performing a baptism, as its amount was deemed insulting.<sup>127</sup> These examples were intended to outrage, and in so doing raise the sympathy of readers for the mission. Marx on the other hand acknowledged that not all of the Roman priests on hand were saintly, but he blames the Belgian immigrants themselves for the lack of religious services; their disobedience, their socialist leanings, and their fractious peasant nature.<sup>128</sup> Thus the issue of the religious situation in the mission field became a rhetorical device, used by Old Catholics, Roman Catholics, and Episcopalians alike to gain sympathy, support, and more funding.

Vilatte had to overcome the disillusionment of the immigrants in the region. They were disaffected by the authoritarian attitudes of some Roman priests, and the poor behaviour of others. The lack of priests and inconsistent provision of pastoral services meant that many immigrants simply felt abandoned by their church. These feelings nurtured the religious apathy of some, exacerbated the anti-clericalism of others, and as many who would otherwise have been active parishioners often travelled great distances to attend Mass, the example of the Roman clergy led them not to bother. Vilatte had to persuade them that not only was Old Catholicism

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<sup>127</sup> *An Account of the Old Catholic Work*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>128</sup> Marx, 'Old Catholics', p. 161.



orthodox, but that its ecclesiology was different, more aligned with their issues and concerns and more suited to the American way of life. In addition to his personal behaviour, Vilatte distinguished Catholicism from 'Romanism' and began to win them over.

Vilatte not only had to persuade disillusioned Roman Catholic immigrants that a return to Catholicism without Romanism was possible, but he also needed to address their concerns over the Americanisation programme of the American Roman Catholic Bishops. Many immigrants balked at the bishops' forced Americanisation, interpreting it as another expression of forced enculturation such as the *Kulturkampf* and Magyarisation they had escaped from in Europe. Life in America meant freedom of worship, as well as self-determination in religious and community matters.

Vilatte, who himself was drawn to America because of its freedoms, understood well immigrants' negative reactions to the Roman Catholic church's demands for obedience, and to divest themselves of any participation in ecclesial matters.

Democracy, the use of the language of the people and national Catholic customs, the congregation selecting its clergy and having full control over its resources, were each a partial remedy to the Romanism that Vilatte campaigned against. His intent was that American Old Catholicism would be thoroughly progressive, and in keeping with the aspirations of immigrants for liberty and freedom.

Many Roman Catholic missionaries, such as Moczygemba, responded to a formal request from a missionary bishop, or a missionary society to leave Europe and to bring the 'consolation of religion' to Roman Catholic immigrants in scattered settlements of the American Mid-west and West. Vilatte's motivation was different. He had come to believe that it was necessary to stem the tide of irreligion amongst the immigrant population, but like many immigrants he rejected the aims and attitudes of the American Roman Catholic hierarchy. Vilatte learned, through his experience as a Protestant missionary and pastor, that culturally, if nominally, Catholic immigrants found Protestant worship and ideas too alien for this to be a successful solution to the growing problem of irreligion. Anglicans, like Bishop Brown observed that there was, for the time being, little chance of successfully converting Catholic immigrants, because they could not be persuaded that Anglicanism was Catholic and not a Protestant heresy. What was needed was Catholicism without Romanism. Vilatte found it for himself in Old Catholicism, and set about bringing the Old Catholic message of liberty, national Catholicism, and orthodoxy without the papacy to the Francophone immigrants around Green Bay, Wisconsin. This meant that Vilatte had to abandon his Presbyterian pastorate, with its salary, position, and stable living arrangements, and start again as a sole missionary of Old Catholicism in America; employing all of his previous experience and skill to realise his vision of 'Catholicism without qualification'. Vilatte faced challenges. First he had to persuade the Francophone immigrants in his chosen field

of Little Sturgeon that he was not a heretic, then he had to persuade them to make the Old Catholic idea their own. His personal presence, intellect, and skill as a preacher helped him to quickly establish a footing. His commitment to national Catholicism — celebrating Mass in French for example — and to the liberty and democracy of America quickly endeared him to the French speaking locals, and by 1888 many families in the area were members of his congregation. Vilatte brought a new way of thinking about Catholicism to immigrant Catholics, one in which they were as much owners and participants in the church as were the clergy. As we will see in the next chapter, Vilatte's experience in the mission field, as well as his commitment to continuing the missionary endeavour so as to spread Independent Catholicism in America made him attractive both to Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV, and to Vilatte's own consecrator, Mar Alvres.

## 7: Why Did the Syrian Church Consecrate Vilatte?

The mechanics of Vilatte's consecration in Colombo, Ceylon in 1892 are well documented. However, to date, there has been no serious discussion about why Mar Alvares supported Vilatte's consecration, and indeed served as the principle consecrator, and why Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV authorised the consecration of a Frenchman working in far away America, who was not already a Syrian Orthodox clergyman. According to Grafton, Vilatte imposed himself upon the Syrians, 'the whole transaction was gangrened with fraud, and fraud vitiates the Sacrament of Order'.<sup>1</sup> Vilatte, he asserted, misrepresented the facts about himself and his work to Alvares.<sup>2</sup> Anson expands upon Grafton's account suggesting that Alvares and Vilatte colluded to manage the Patriarch in order to achieve Vilatte's consecration.<sup>3</sup> This has been, for more than fifty years, the received narrative, for which this project has

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mar Timotheos's Consecration', *Western Mail*, 7 January 1899, p. 6. This is a published exchange of letters between Fr. Ignatius and Mar Alvares wherein Fr. Ignatius cites Grafton.

<sup>2</sup> *PECUSA General Convention 1892*, p. 122.

<sup>3</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 107, 108.

found no substantive independent evidence. It purports to explain how Vilatte was consecrated and focusses on his supposed, unsavoury desire for personal gain, while diplomatically vindicating the Patriarch as a victim of fraud. In this way, the traditional narrative does not consider what might have been the Syrian Church's actual motivation for consecrating Vilatte.

This version worked well for Grafton's own aims; he was furious that the Dutch Old Catholics, then the Russian Orthodox, and now the Syrian Orthodox, in recognising Vilatte as an Orthodox Catholic, and encouraging his mission in Wisconsin, impugned Grafton's self identification as the Catholic bishop in Fond du Lac. Grafton wished to present the Protestant Episcopal Church as the Catholic Church of America, and went so far as to boast that, at least in his diocese, the churches were fully Catholic. Vilatte became a target for Grafton's rage; as long as Vilatte was perceived to have legitimacy this challenged Grafton's own claims to represent orthodox Catholicism in the face of Roman Catholic and Protestant heresy. Vilatte, for as long as he was in Wisconsin, was a constant reminder to, for example, Francophone and Central European immigrants that the Episcopalians were in fact Protestants. Grafton's rhetorical device of undermining Vilatte's character and his validity has had a lasting impact on the story of early Independent Catholicism in the United States, perhaps because later writers who relied on Grafton's account also shared some of his biases. It says more about Grafton's aims and attitudes, however,

and offers no objective insight into the Patriarch's thinking about, or Mar Alvares' support for, consecrating Vilatte.

As we are unable to rely on these earlier accounts, it is necessary to look for new or previously overlooked material. Letters exchanged between Mar Alvares and Vilatte, and Mar Alvares and Fr. Ignatius, as well as letters that Mar Alvares' aides sent to Grafton and the Wisconsin press and accounts of his attitudes and activities before and during Vilatte's stay in Ceylon provide material for an assessment of Mar Alvares' support for Vilatte's consecration. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the Patriarch's thinking. There are no known letters, for example, between Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV and Vilatte, or between him and Mar Alvares about Vilatte. Likewise, the material that would typically form Vilatte's consecration documentation, such as a pastoral letter and staticon, are either missing or were never issued. In the Syrian church of the day these two additional documents often provided an insight as to the circumstances and reasons for which the candidate was chosen, and for what particular purpose or project, if any. We can therefore only resort to reasonable speculation about the Patriarch's intentions based on key events of his reign, namely his trip to Britain in 1874-5 and its results, which were widely reported in the British press.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first surveys Vilatte's consecration

documentation to see if it provides any insight into the Patriarch's motivation for consecrating another Frenchman (Jules Ferrette having been the first), and not just as a missionary bishop (as he consecrated Ferrette), but as a metropolitan. The second section begins by exploring why the then Ecumenical Metropolitan Mar Julius consecrated the quirky, idealistic Frenchman Jules Ferrette in 1866. It then considers Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV's activity from his enthronement in 1872 to the Mulanthuruthy synod in India of 1876, during which time he navigated the politics at the Ottoman court to acquire the firman recognising his authority as Patriarch, then travelled to London, where he patiently navigated the various government offices and personalities to acquire, in effect the equivalent of, a firman from the British government confirming his authority over the Syrian Church in India. It is his time in Britain and its results that provide useful material for speculation and also a sense of how Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV thought and operated. The third section examines Mar Alvares' letters and activities surrounding Vilatte's visit to Colombo between 1891 and 1892. Alvares campaigned for a national Catholicism, which he found in the Syrian Church. He was from 1887 a confirmed anti-romanist, and being close geographically and in time to the events surrounding the Patriarch's visit to India, he was also sensitive to the effects of one church interfering in the affairs of another. What emerges in these two men's stories is that, contrary to the received narrative, Vilatte's consecration was a highly considered affair, one supported by the experiences of two men who were looking to the future of the Syrian tradition, and

seeking to break into Western Europe and the New World. It is reasonable to surmise that their outreach to the West was not just for missionary ambition: events had taught them that their church needed to engage with western society to defend itself in its home territories.

### **Vilatte's Consecration Documents**

Vilatte's original consecration documents are now lost. However, trustworthy translations were published soon after and are still accessible.<sup>4</sup> Three documents are available: the Patriarchal Bull authorising his consecration issued 29 December 1891; the instrument of consecration signed by Mar Alvares, Mar Athanasius, and Mar Gregorius dated 29 May 1892; and an additional letter signed by Mar Alvares confirming Vilatte's consecration dated 5 June 1892.<sup>5</sup> Two other typical documents are missing: a pastoral letter from the Patriarch to the Old Catholics in the United States, and a staticon. It appears that the pastoral letter was issued, but is now lost, there are no known translations, and Vilatte did not cite or mention it in his publications or interviews. No staticon appears to have been issued. There are no excerpts, translations, or mentions of it in the available material. The known

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<sup>4</sup> George A. Kiraz, 'The Credentials Of Mar Julius Alvares, Bishop Of Ceylon, Goa And India Excluding Malabar', *Hugoye: Journal Of Syriac Studies*, 7 (2007), 157-168 (pp. 160-164); 'Our Eyrenikon', *The Old Catholic*, October 1897, pp. 2-3. Excerpts are included in: A Close Observer, 'Recent Schismatical Movements Among Catholics of The United States', *American Ecclesiastical Review* (July 1899), 1-13 (pp. 7-8).

<sup>5</sup> 'Our Eyrenikon', *The Old Catholic*, October 1897, p. 2.



documents are formulaic and offer no insight into the Patriarch's reasons for supporting this far off mission of Old Catholics with the exception of two details; Vilatte's consecration name, and that the Patriarch made him metropolitan of the United States. As it is, we must speculate on the choice of Vilatte's consecration name, the choice to make him a metropolitan, and the possible reasons why Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV apparently departed from the Syrian Church's norm by not issuing a staticon.

Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV bestowed Vilatte with the consecration name Timotheos.<sup>6</sup> A new bishop was encouraged to aspire to emulate the noble characteristics of his namesake. Officially the name was bestowed by the Holy Spirit, who was also the active agent of consecration.<sup>7</sup> At the time there was a set list of twelve names traditionally bestowed upon new Syrian bishops including Julius, Dionysius, and Timotheos.<sup>8</sup> Patriarch Elias II gave the future Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV the name Julius when he consecrated him in 1846. As Boutros Mar Julius, he bestowed the name Julius upon Ferrette in 1866, and upon Alvares at his consecration in 1889. It does not appear that any of Vilatte's contemporaries received

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<sup>6</sup> 'A Retrospect', *The American Old Catholic*, May 1915, p. 7; Kiraz, 'Credentials Of Mar Julius Alvares', p. 162.

<sup>7</sup> G. B. Howard, 'The Christians Of St. Thomas: — The *Staticon*, Or Epistle Commendatory Of Mar Athanasius', *The Colonial Church Chronicle, Missionary Journal And Foreign Ecclesiastical Reporter*, May 1872, p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> Edavalikel Philipos, *The Syrian Christians Of Malabar Otherwise Called The Christians Of S. Thomas*, ed. by, G. B. Howard (Oxford: James Parker And Co., 1869), p. 16.

the name Timotheos from the Patriarch.<sup>9</sup> What then inspired the Patriarch to order that Vilatte's consecration name be Timotheos?

Timothy, according to legend, was the first bishop of Ephesus, installed by the Apostle Paul to lead the church there. Vilatte was the first Syrian Orthodox bishop of the United States. No doubt the Patriarch attached some significance to the name in this regard, as well as the fact that Vilatte was sent not as a replacement for an earlier bishop, but as a missionary. Paul sent Timothy as a missionary in his name, trusting that he would impart what Ignatius would call 'orthodoxy' to his audience. Writing to the believers in Corinth Paul said: 'I have sent you Timothy, a dear and faithful son to me in the Lord, who will remind you of my principles of conduct in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.'<sup>10</sup> The Patriarch charged Vilatte with serving and establishing churches that upheld the Orthodox faith. The Epistles describe Timothy as Paul's co-worker. Whilst it is easy to see how Vilatte's charge to spread Orthodoxy to the West was part of the Patriarch's plan, it is also worth considering if there could have been a more activist role in the Patriarch's intent: perhaps the Patriarch was not just sending a missionary Orthodox bishop, but a bishop committed to Catholic reform, that is to restore Catholicity where it had been lost, as he had earlier sent Ferrette to Europe. Vilatte then becomes a co-worker with the Patriarch, Ferrette, and Alvares. Vilatte's consecration name was pregnant with

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<sup>9</sup> There was however, a Mar Timotheos, Metropolitan of the Throne of Edessa, who aided the then Patriarch in trying to dislodge Mar Athanasius from the church in Malabar - around 1845: Philippos, *Syrian Christians Of Malabar*, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> 1Cor. 4.17

meaning and symbolism, and throws some light on the Patriarch's intentions in authorising his consecration, not just to the episcopacy, but also (and unexpectedly) as Metropolitan of America.

Vilatte's exchanges with Mar Alvares prior to his departure for Ceylon only indicate his being consecrated a bishop. What is more, mentions of Vilatte in *The Independent Catholic*, published by Alvares' community in Colombo, through the first months of 1892 referred to him as the 'Bishop-elect' until the May edition. Vilatte, and possibly Alvares, was surprised when the Patriarchal Bull arrived in 1892 authorising his consecration as a metropolitan.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Ignatius Boutros realised that if Vilatte were going to have any chance of success, he needed as much stature and independence as could be afforded. Vilatte's community appears to have interpreted the Patriarch's choice in just such a fashion:

Father Vilatte expected to be made a simple bishop, but the Holy See of Antioch which had in 1854 sent a regional bishop to Europe and America to gather the lost souls of the house of God from popish and rationalist error into the true fold, again sends our leader forth on a similar errand, making Archbishop Vilatte Primatial Metropolitan with regional jurisdiction for the western world.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 'A Retrospect', *The American Old Catholic*, May 1915, 6-8 (p. 7).

<sup>12</sup> 'A Retrospect', *The American Old Catholic*, May 1915, 6-8 (p. 7).

As metropolitan, Vilatte's authority was such that it empowered him to expand the Independent Catholic mission in the United States, probably beyond what he had previously imagined.<sup>13</sup>

A staticon is a letter of faculty that the Patriarch gives a new bishop in the Syrian church. A staticon emphasises the suitability of the candidate for his new office, and the Patriarch's trust in him.<sup>14</sup> It also states the rationale for consecrating a new bishop or metropolitan. Mar Athanasius' 1842 Staticon describes how the people of the Indian church were without leadership, or so Patriarch Elias II had been led to believe.<sup>15</sup> 'Know, dearly beloved children that when ye sent a letter saying "We have no Shepherd, neither Priesthood, nor Baptism, nor a Conductor," your complaint oppressed us with much sadness, and we desired greatly to send you a true shepherd, who should come and care for you, and be a faithful conductor'.<sup>16</sup> In addition to authorising the new bishop to perform the normal functions of his office, to ordain priests, deacons, to consecrate churches, 'and to complete everything, as becometh the children of his order and degree' the Patriarch may add specific duties

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<sup>13</sup> 'The Old Catholic Church', *The New York Times*, 11 September 1892, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> G. B. Howard, 'The Christians Of St. Thomas: — The *Staticon*, Or Epistle Commendatory Of Mar Athanasius', *The Colonial Church Chronicle, Missionary Journal And Foreign Ecclesiastical Reporter*, May 1872, pp. 186-187.

<sup>15</sup> It turns out that Mar Athanasius was less than honest: Philipos, *Syrian Christians Of Malabar*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> G. B. Howard, 'The Christians Of St. Thomas: — The *Staticon*, Or Epistle Commendatory Of Mar Athanasius', *The Colonial Church Chronicle, Missionary Journal And Foreign Ecclesiastical Reporter*, May 1872, p. 186.

suitable for the new bishop and his situation.<sup>17</sup> Patriarch Elias II charged Mar Athanasius with establishing a seminary, and schools.<sup>18</sup> When Patriarch Jacob II consecrated Mar Dionysius V in 1865 for the Indian church, his specific mission was to resolve the problems left in the wake of Mar Athanasius' schemes.<sup>19</sup> Vilatte's staticon, had one been issued, like those of Mar Athanasius and Mar Dionysius, would have included useful details about the Patriarch's intentions for Vilatte's mission to the United States.

Vilatte's official documentation notes that: 'We entrust to his care the general epistle from the Holy See, addressed to the believers of the above said Dioceses; also we have to add, that His Holiness the Patriarch is prayed and expected to speedily despatch the staticon definitely describing his authority and jurisdiction.'<sup>20</sup> It suggests that Mar Alvares and the other consecrating metropolitans, Mar Athanasius and Mar Gregorius, were puzzled that no staticon was sent with the Bull, dated the previous year, that authorised Vilatte's consecration. This raises questions about the Patriarch's intentions for Vilatte and his mission. When, according to Ferrette's

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<sup>17</sup> G. B. Howard, 'The Christians Of St. Thomas: — The *Staticon*, Or Epistle Commendatory Of Mar Athanasius', *The Colonial Church Chronicle, Missionary Journal And Foreign Ecclesiastical Reporter*, May 1872, p. 188.

<sup>18</sup> G. B. Howard, 'The Christians Of St. Thomas: — The *Staticon*, Or Epistle Commendatory Of Mar Athanasius', *The Colonial Church Chronicle, Missionary Journal And Foreign Ecclesiastical Reporter*, May 1872, p. 188.

<sup>19</sup> Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, p. 350.

<sup>20</sup> Kiraz, 'Credentials Of Mar Julius Alvares', p. 163.

account, the then Mar Julius, Ecumenical Metropolitan resident at Homs, consecrated Jules Ferrette, he impressed upon him his independence from the Syrian Church. Ferrette, informally at least, was a missionary bishop, but one who enjoyed autocephaly. Mar Alvares' work was a western rite special project within the traditional territory and framework of the Syrian church. Vilatte represented a special project, but one outside the Syrian Church's traditionally recognised territory. What is more, none of the historic Patriarchal Sees had an established rightful claim to that territory — it was, in Vilatte's words, an open mission field. The Patriarch may have seen this as an opportunity to use Syrian influence to establish an American Orthodoxy, and recognised that, in order to be free of the entanglements of the religious politics of the Old World, it should be autocephalous.<sup>21</sup> No doubt recognising the difficulties he might encounter from the Ottomans if he were to be anything other than discreet, and possibly understanding, from Mar Alvares' own experiences, that foreign influence in an American church would not be welcomed, it seems that the omission of a staticon for Vilatte was a strategy of the Patriarch's to ensure that Vilatte had as many options as possible. That this was no accident can be inferred from the fact that no staticon was issued even after the consecrators alerted the Patriarch to its omission.

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<sup>21</sup> 'A Retrospect', *The American Old Catholic*, May 1915, 6-8 (p. 7). Mar Alvares certainly saw Vilatte's activity in Britain as doing just that: 'Father Ignatius', *Western Mail*, 20 July 1899, p. 6.

## **Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV: Background of His Support For Vilatte's**

### **Consecration**

In the mid-nineteenth century the Syrian Orthodox church was a shadow of its historic self, composed of about 200,000 families.<sup>22</sup> Not only was the church under constant pressure from the missionary efforts of Syrian Catholics (mostly through defections of bishops and priests) and European and American Protestants, but the Patriarch had to contend with the politics and corruption of Ottoman officials, who were happy to keep the various Christian sects in constant tension and competing with one another for state favour. First Ecumenical Metropolitan, and later Patriarch, Boutros ibn Salmo Mesko, was born in Mosul in 1798. During his reign he strengthened the Patriarch's position within the Ottoman court, and in the church in India. Inspired perhaps by the activities of Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries, the Patriarch established two missionary bishops; Ferrette, who went to Britain, and then Vilatte for North America. Broadly speaking, his time in office was marked by efforts to break the isolation and insularity of the Syrian church and its community. Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV died in 1894 aged 96, only two years after Vilatte's consecration.<sup>23</sup> This section is in two parts, firstly a brief discussion about his possible motives for consecrating Ferrette in 1866, and what that might tell

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<sup>22</sup> 'Reception Of The Syrian Bishops', *The Bury And Norwich Post, And Suffolk Herald*, 20 October 1874, p. 3; Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, p. 62.

<sup>23</sup> Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, p. ix; 'Death Of His Holiness The Patriarch Of Antioch', *The Old Catholic*, March 1895, p. 1.

us about his later support for consecrating Vilatte; secondly what additional insights his trip to Britain and India between 1874 and 1876 might offer with respect to his decision in 1891 to authorise Vilatte's consecration.

Six years before he became Patriarch, Mar Julius personally consecrated Jules Ferrette in Homs.<sup>24</sup> Ferrette, as we have seen, was an idealist who originally believed that the loss of apostolic succession in Protestantism was a barrier to Christian reunion.<sup>25</sup> Mar Julius, however keen he might have been on the idea of Christian reunion, saw the situation in Europe differently. For him, the heresy of Roman Catholicism and its subsequent Protestant schisms meant that orthodoxy, and with it apostolic succession, had collapsed in the West. Ferrette's mission, according to Mar Julius, was to reinstate orthodoxy and lay the foundation for a national Catholic Church that met the needs of the people of Britain. When he later, as Patriarch, authorised Vilatte's consecration, it was also as a missionary bishop to the West, but this time to the virgin mission field of North America, where there was as yet no dominant national church, although both the Roman Catholics and the Anglo-Catholic Episcopalians were competing with one another to be seen as such. His support for Vilatte was in effect the Patriarch joining the fray between divergent visions of Catholic orthodoxy, and between the missionaries of different churches.

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<sup>24</sup> 'M. Jules Ferrette', *The Church Times*, 5 December 1879, p. 765.

<sup>25</sup> 'The Bishop of Iona', *The Church Times*, 24 November 1866, p. 1.



Once he secured both his firmin confirming his official status as Patriarch and the right to directly represent the Syrian Orthodox community at the Ottoman court, independent from the Armenian church, Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV set off for Britain.<sup>26</sup> On this trip, between September 1874 and April 1875, he succeeded in achieving two additional aims; firstly to gain official assurances from the British government for his authority over the Church in India, in order to resolve an ongoing schism and conflict caused by CMS missionaries over forty years earlier, and secondly to solicit resources to ameliorate the conditions of his flock in Syria. Both of these aims touch on the goals of Vilatte's own, later mission; to protect the Catholic identity of his mission against Anglican interference, and to promote the welfare of his immigrant community in America.

Trouble began in the Indian Church with the arrival of Reverend J. Peet in 1833 to take charge of the theological college established by Mar Dionysius II and Colonel Munro in 1815. Over the next three years, and with Bishop Wilson's support, Peet attempted to 'reform' the Syrian Church, along what Philip and his contemporaries contended were Protestant lines.<sup>27</sup> In 1836 an Indian church synod formally rejected

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<sup>26</sup> Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, p. 314.

<sup>27</sup> E. M. Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 5 February 1904, p. 176. An alternative (Protestant) narrative is included in: M. A. Sherring, *The History Of Protestant Missions In India* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1884), pp. 286-296. Bishop Wilson delivered a speech to Mar Athanasius' partisans, and missionaries in Kottayam on 13 February 1843 in which he defended his actions. The Syrian church, he claimed was superstitious, idolatrous, and Simoniacal. 'I now come to consider, as my duty compels, the causes of the unavoidable separation of

Peet and Wilson's demands, which according to Philip's account, resulted in the CMS raiding the college treasury and using those resources to establish their own school.<sup>28</sup> The schism and confusion, highlighted by Philip in his 1904 series in *The Church Times*, related not only to the establishment of a separate school and the teaching of Protestant doctrine, but also to the establishment of a competing hierarchy supported by the CMS. In 1842, six years after the college funds were raided, a deacon named Mathew presented himself to Patriarch Elias II in Syria and convinced him that there was no living metropolitan in India.<sup>29</sup> The Patriarch

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our Church Mission from the Syrian Church as a body, at least for a time...Nothing then remained for you, my Reverend Brethren, but to act as you have done, under the direction and approbation of your beloved and respected Diocesan. You had no other course to take but to build churches for yourselves, to go on with your schools, to multiply copies of the Scriptures, to erect, as you have done, your own college, and to carry on an unfettered and open Mission for the good of the heathen...and Syrians around you, who might voluntarily and peaceably avail themselves of your labours, avoiding all interference with the Metran and the authorities of the Syrian Churches, and awaiting a more favourable time for resuming your system of co-operation and aid with them': W. J. Richards, *The Indian Christians Of St. Thomas Otherwise Called The Syrian Christians of Malabar* (London: Bemrose & Sons, 1908), pp. 126, 128-129.

<sup>28</sup> E. M. Philip, 'An Indian National Church', *The Church Times*, 5 February 1904, pp. 175-176; 'The C.M.S. And The Christians Of St. Thomas', *The Church Times*, 17 October 1902, p. 446.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Christians Of St. Thomas', *The Colonial Church Chronicle, Missionary Journal, And Foreign Ecclesiastical Reporter*, February 1872, pp. 61-62; Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, p. 350. It was this Mar Athanasius whose consecration, while only a deacon, led to later confusion over the validity of Vilatte's consecration in 1892, because Paul Mar Athanasius served as co-consecrator both for Mar Alvares (29 July 1888), and for Vilatte. Mar Dionysius in a letter to Vilatte dated 10 July 1894, reassured him that 'Mar Paulos Athanasius, one of the six bishops consecrated by the Patriarch (of Antioch) in 1877, is one of those who consecrated you. He was also one of those who consecrated (Archbishop) Mar Julius Alvarez [*sic*]. He was duly ordained a priest by the late Mar Coorilas, the Antiochean bishop sent to supersede Mar Matthew Athanasius': 'A Letter From His Eminence Mar Dionysius', *The Old*

accepted Mathew's evidence that the Indian church had no leader, and consecrated him in Syria in 1842 as Metropolitan of Malabar. Patriarch Elias II was unaware that Mar Dionysius IV was still alive. He realised too late that he had been deceived. Now there were two rival claimants to the leadership of the church in India. Athanasius' party repudiated the authority of the Patriarch, declared themselves autonomous, and professed 'full sympathy with the *Prayer book* [sic] and *Articles of The Church of England*.'<sup>30</sup> The schismatics, backed by the British Resident, the Travancore courts and the CMS, claimed the property and resources of the Syrian Church in India.<sup>31</sup> Mar Athanasius' consecration, and his alliance with the CMS cause, sparked confusion over the leadership of the Indian Church and its doctrinal position, and caused a schism.

Patriarch Elias II anathematised Mar Athanasius, and consecrated his own secretary and treasurer Mar Koorilos to take over the church in India in 1846.<sup>32</sup> Elias II died in 1847. His successor, Patriarch Ignatius Yacoub II, expressed his support for

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*Catholic*, June 1895, 1-2 (p. 2). The confusion between the two Athanasiiuses continued to fuel rumours that Vilatte's consecration was not valid: 'Our Eyrenikon', *The Old Catholic*, October 1897, p. 1. Although this clarification of identities was known at the time, the confusion over which Mar Athanasius participated in both Alvares' and Vilatte's consecrations was convenient when, in 1900, Rome decided against accepting Vilatte's consecration as valid: 'Recent Schismatical Movements', pp. 6-7; 'Vilatte's Plea Refused', *The Washington Times*, 25 December 1899, p. 1; 'Dr. Vilatte At Rome. The Bishop Retracts. His Errors. His Orders Alleged To Be Valid.', *Western Mail*, 11 February 1899, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> *The Real Proselytizers Not The C.M.S.*, p. 1. Italics in original.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Syrian Patriarch of Antioch', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 April 1875, p. 12; Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, p. 351.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Syrian Patriarch of Antioch', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 April 1875, p. 12.

Mar Koorilos and renewed Patriarch Elias' excommunication of Mar Athanasius in May 1847. Ignatius Yacoub's letter to the church in India not only cites Athanasius' deception of Patriarch Elias II, but states:

the accursed Matthew [Mar Athanasius] had acted impiously, and was a heretic, and had changed his profession [of faith], and had abolished the feasts and the customs and the Canons Apostolic, and had taught new customs at his own pleasure, and was a heretic notable in heresies, and wished to mislead all our people, such as would listen to him, and many had wandered after his vain doctrine.<sup>33</sup>

The schismatic Mar Athanasius caused continued to trouble the Indian Church through Ignatius Yacoub's reign (1847-1871), and incited his successor, Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV, to undertake his trip to Britain between 1874 and 1875, followed by a visit to India between 1875 and 1876.

The Patriarch began organising his trip to Britain while he was in Istanbul acquiring both a firman confirming his office as Patriarch, and a firman giving him authority to represent the interests of Syrian Orthodox Christians independent of the Armenian Patriarch. His arrival in Britain was anticipated from late April 1874; however, due to delays he did not arrive in London until Saturday, 5 September

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<sup>33</sup> Philipos, *The Syrian Christians Of Malabar*, p. 30.

1874.<sup>34</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury, Archibald Tait, was not well disposed to the Patriarch's visit, or to his principal aim — to heal the schism of the church in India and reassert his authority as its leader.<sup>35</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette* reported that Anglican

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<sup>34</sup> On the anticipation of his arrival: 'The Syrian Christians', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 April 1874, p. 5. On the Patriarch's arrival, see 'Church News', *The Standard*, 8 September 1874, p. 6. On his aims while visiting Britain, see for example, *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 9 September 1874, p. 5. For evidence that he organised and coordinated his visit with British well wishers and officials see: 'The Patriarch of Antioch' *Sheffield And Rotherham Independent*, 6 September 1874, p. 3; 'The Syrian Patriarch Of Antioch' *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 January 1875, p. 3; 'The Patriarch Of Antioch', *The Times*, 8 January 1875, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Parry downplays the prominence of resolving the conflict in the Indian Church during the Patriarch's visit to Britain. 'The Patriarch was invited to England to treat of matters entirely different from those in India, whither he went, not by his own wish, but on strong advice given him in England': Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, p. 351. Parry not only states that the visit itself was organised by and at the invitation of people in England, including Archbishop of Canterbury Archibald Tait, but that the Patriarch had to be persuaded by Queen Victoria, Tait, and officials at the India Office to address the difficulties in the Indian Church. In January 1875, Col. J. C. Gawler, Secretary to the Oriental Christians' Aid Association, wrote to *The Times* to appeal for donations to cover the cost of the unforeseen length of the Patriarch's stay as 'difficulties which have arisen in the transaction of his business with the various authorities to whom he has been referred backwards and forwards...It would be a poor return if this Prelate, who came as an invited guest, is obliged to pay the necessary expenses of his stay in this country, which is being unavoidably prolonged while his business remains unsettled': 'The Patriarch Of Antioch', *The Times*, 8 January 1875, p. 10. Rev. W. T. Bullock, the Secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, wrote a response to *The Times* on 11 January 1875. 'His journey to England was undertaken solely on his own responsibility, in the probably mistaken hope of obtaining the help of the British Government in certain long-cherished plans of his own. He was not invited by me, nor, so far as I know, by any other person. In England; and I believe that his intention to visit us was not heard of in England until he had come on his way from Mesopotamia so far as Constantinople': 'The Syrian Patriarch Of Antioch', *The Times*, 11 January 1875, p. 7. This might be the source for Seraphim's account, that the Patriarch's visit was entirely of his own plan, and that he kept his plans secret until he departed for Britain: Seraphim, *Flesh of Our Brethren*, pp. 29-30. On 12 January, *The Times* published a letter from Walter Severn, on behalf of the Committee of the Oriental Christians' Aid Association, in which he quotes a letter from Rev. Bullock,

and British government officials in India had sided with Mar Athanasius' party over the claims of the Patriarch's.<sup>36</sup> Tait, in his address to the Patriarch when he received him at Lambeth Palace on 15 September 1874, suggested to the Patriarch that, as Mar Athanasius appeared to Tait to have the confidence of the majority of church members, the Patriarch would be better served imitating the arrangements of the Church of England, and granting the 'colonial' Indian church its independence whilst maintaining communion.<sup>37</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette* reported that: 'The Patriarch at once gave a decided negative to this suggestion, and continued to urge his suit upon the India Office.'<sup>38</sup>

Tait's opposition did not dissuade the Patriarch. Having spent the first year of his reign in the Ottoman court securing his office, as well as the right to act on behalf of his people, Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV knew well how to play politics. He arrived in London armed with letters from not only the British ambassador in Istanbul, but

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who wrote to him from Kensington Palace on 12 March 1874; 'I have just heard from Constantinople. The Patriarch and his secretary gratefully accept the invitation, and will be glad to remain one month. The invitation seems to have given very great pleasure': 'The Patriarch Of Antioch', *The Times*, 12 January 1875, p. 10. It appears that the Patriarch may have been invited to England to promote the needs of the Church in Syria, and was, while here, actively discouraged from addressing the situation in India, but that he planned from the start to accomplish both.

<sup>36</sup> 'The Syrian Patriarch of Antioch', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 April 1875, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> 'Church News', *The Standard*, 18 September 1874, p. 3; 'The Syrian Patriarch of Antioch', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 April 1875, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> 'The Syrian Patriarch of Antioch', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 April 1875, p. 12.

also the Ottoman Foreign Office, and the Ottoman ambassador to London.<sup>39</sup> These letters no doubt emphasised that his suit was a diplomatic, and not merely an ecclesiastical, affair. If he did not already know of Queen Victoria's 1 November 1858 proclamation of religious non-interference in India<sup>40</sup> before he arrived in London, it is likely that he did after he met (on Thursday, 15 October 1874) at the Foreign Office with Edward Stanley, Earl of Derby, then Foreign Secretary, and previously the first Secretary of State for India.<sup>41</sup> The Patriarch was 'referred backwards and forwards' between 'the various authorities' before whom he pressed his cause.<sup>42</sup> This extended his stay beyond the month that he had originally intended. In January 1875 he received word that his case had been taken up by the India Office.<sup>43</sup> His Byzantine patience resulted not only in two audiences with Queen Victoria, on 5 and 12 March 1875,<sup>44</sup> but also, against prevailing expectations, success on his mission. Patriarch

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<sup>39</sup> 'The Patriarch of Antioch', *Leicester Chronicle or Commercial and Leicestershire Mercury*, 12 September 1874, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> 'Firmly relying Ourselves on the truth of Christianity, and acknowledging with gratitude the solace of Religion, We disclaim alike the Right and the Desire to impose our Convictions on any of Our Subjects. ...We do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under Us, that they abstain from all interference with the Religious Belief or Worship of any of Our Subjects, on pain of Our highest Displeasure': *Proclamation by the Queen in Council to the Princes, Chiefs and people of India (published by the Governor-General at Allahabad, November 1st 1858)* (London: 1 November 1858).

<sup>41</sup> *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 16 October 1874, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> 'The Patriarch of Antioch', *The Times*, 8 January 1875, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> 'The Patriarch of Antioch', *The Times*, 12 January 1875, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> 'The Court', *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 13 March 1875, p. 7; 'Court And Official', *The Bradford Observer*, 8 March 1875, p. 3; 'The Patriarch Of Antioch', *Daily News*, 6 April 1875, p. 6.

Ignatius Boutros IV left Britain in April, 1875<sup>45</sup> with his desired concessions guaranteeing his authority over the church in India.

The Patriarch arrived in India in the summer of 1875. He journeyed to Travancore, meeting various British and Indian officials along the way. When he convened the Synod of Mulanthuruthy, held between 28 and 30 June 1876, the Patriarch had successfully persuaded the government to rescind the royal decree supporting Mar Athanasius and his faction. The resolution adopted by the synod celebrated the Patriarch's championing of the cause of Orthodoxy and his victory against the deceitful, heretical Mar Athanasius.

We have assembled here to confirm the aforesaid faith...Holy Father, from the origin of this Church, we are under the jurisdiction of the Holy See of Antioch, which, in order to help and deliver us, on every occasion of our depression had offered us much riches...and confirmed us in faith...From the earliest ages, the Syrians in Malankara and their churches are under the spiritual authority of the Patriarch of Antioch. Nobody else has any kind of authority.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> 'The Patriarch Of Antioch', *Daily News*, 6 April 1875, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> 'Mulanthuruthy Padiyola - AD. 1876', [http://www.syriacchristianity.info/PARAVUR/mulunthuruthy\\_padiyola.pdf](http://www.syriacchristianity.info/PARAVUR/mulunthuruthy_padiyola.pdf) [accessed 13 January 2019, 11:15]; Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, pp. 351-352.



At the time of Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV's visit to Britain there were between 100,000 and 200,000 members of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Syria.<sup>47</sup> In addition to the Patriarch there were 8 metropolitans and 3 bishops. The Patriarch, during a meeting at the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, stated that there were 20 dioceses but many were unfilled.<sup>48</sup> This suggests that there was a shortage of clergy, or that the effects of Ottoman pressure and foreign missionaries had truncated the influence and geographic extent of the church. The clergy, though well versed in Scripture and the services of the church, did not possess a broader education, nor did they have as intimate a knowledge of theology as the Patriarch desired.<sup>49</sup> Though proud of the fact that much of the learning now taken for granted in the West had its origins in the East, he expressed his hope that one day it would return there.<sup>50</sup> The Ottoman state impeded Christian education, and he was losing out to schools controlled by Protestant missionaries from America and Britain, as well as to those of (mostly French) Roman Catholics, all of which proselytised as much as they educated. He believed that if he could fund his own, native Syrian schools for children, and theological colleges for young men, he might elevate his

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<sup>47</sup> 'Reception Of The Syrian Bishops', *The Bury And Norwich Post, And Suffolk Herald*, 20 October 1874, p. 3; Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, p. 62

<sup>48</sup> 'Reception Of The Syrian Bishops', *The Bury And Norwich Post, And Suffolk Herald*, 20 October 1874, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> 'Reception Of The Syrian Bishops', *The Bury And Norwich Post, And Suffolk Herald*, 20 October 1874, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> 'The International Congress Of Orientalists', *The Morning Post*, 21 September 1874, p. 2.

people's situation, and reclaim their standing.

The Patriarch was not idle while he pressed for his 'firmin' from the British government. He took advantage of the time between meeting various officials to seek assistance to alleviate the condition of his people within the Ottoman Empire. Though Archbishop Tait did not back the Patriarch's first aim, on 29 October 1874 he did write supporting the second, to raise funds to establish schools for children, and colleges to train both teachers and clergy.<sup>51</sup> The Patriarch attended the Church Congress meeting in Brighton. On the evening of 8 October, as part of the programme, a 'large meeting to advocate the needs of the Syrian Churches' was held in the Brighton pavilion.<sup>52</sup> Two weeks later, speaking at an evening meeting of The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the Patriarch told his audience that he could provide a better education for his people and clergy if he had more resources.<sup>53</sup> 'He is very anxious to take back to his people a printing press, and he also asks for men, women, and money to help him in establishing colleges, male and female, so that he may counteract the manner in which Mahommedanism has discouraged Christian education.'<sup>54</sup> The Patriarch successfully appealed to British

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<sup>51</sup> 'The Syrian Patriarchate Educational Fund', *The Standard*, 22 Jan 1875, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Church Congress', *The Yorkshire Herald and York Herald*, 9 October 1874, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> 'Reception Of The Syrian Bishops', *The Bury And Norwich Post, And Suffolk Herald*, 20 October 1874, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> 'Reception Of The Syrian Bishops', *The Bury And Norwich Post, And Suffolk Herald*, 20 October 1874, p. 3.

Christians' desire to spread Christianity in opposition to Islam, but also to their anti-Roman Catholic sentiments.<sup>55</sup> Bishop Claughton, who attended the meeting, expressed his belief that 'when the Chief Bishop came to ask them for help in educating his people ...their aid would probably lead to the abating of [existing] erroneous teaching. The fact that they were not slaves to the See of Rome should be a recommendation to ourselves'.<sup>56</sup> The Syrian Patriarchate Educational Fund was established as a result of the Patriarch's appeal, appearances, and speeches during his seven months stay in England.<sup>57</sup> By January 1875 the fund had over £300,<sup>58</sup> and Queen Victoria contributed another £50 in April.<sup>59</sup>

There is no known documentary evidence that sets out the Patriarch's rationale for supporting and ordering Vilatte's consecration. Brandreth and Anson suggest that the entire affair was 'managed' by Vilatte and Alvares, who judiciously kept important information from the aged (read senile) cleric.<sup>60</sup> However, Parry's account

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<sup>55</sup> One of the main topics at the Church Congress he attended in Brighton on 7 October; 'The Church Congress', *The Hampshire Advertiser*, 10 October 1874, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> 'Reception Of The Syrian Bishops', *The Bury And Norwich Post, And Suffolk Herald*, 20 October 1874, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> 'The Syrian Patriarchate Educational Fund', *The Standard*, 22 Jan 1875, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> 'The Syrian Patriarchate Educational Fund', *The Standard*, 22 Jan 1875, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *The Bradford Observer*, 20 April 1875, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, p. 33; Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 108. Fr. Ignatius, writing to Mar Alvares in October 1899 asked directly if, as Grafton had stated, Vilatte had imposed upon him, or the other bishops in order to acquire consecration. Alvares admitted that the bishops in India received, and investigated Grafton's complaints against Vilatte, however, 'we found to our full satisfaction, that Bishop Grafton was only trying to pay off a private grudge.' Alvares explained. that: 'Nearly

of his visit to the Patriarchal residence in Mardin in 1892, the same year as Vilatte's consecration, describes a man fully engaged, informed, and in charge not only of his own faculties, but also of church affairs.<sup>61</sup> Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV's accomplishments during his journey to Britain, then to India between 1874 and 1876 offers two more reasonable explanations for his decision to support Vilatte. When he first arrived in England, the prevailing opinion was that he was wasting his time, that he ought to give in and let go of the church in India. Believing in the rightness of his cause, the Patriarch persisted, and his patient persistence paid off. It is not a stretch to imagine that he would see a parallel of his own experience in Vilatte, who, with a tiny, under-resourced, minority community, persisted in standing up for its identity and independence in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds, approaching any and all who might help them. Secondly, the Patriarch probably saw in Vilatte a champion for Catholic orthodoxy in the face of heretical Protestant and Roman Catholic missionary activities. Finally, it is likely that he agreed with Vilatte that North America was an open mission field, one worth sowing with Catholic orthodoxy.

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a year elapsed since the application of the Old Catholics of America to consecrate Mgr. Vilatte and the sanction of the Holy See of Antioch thereon. The pros and cons were fully investigated in Ceylon, Malabar, and Antioch, and it was after mature deliberation that the sanction for consecration was granted. Mgr. Vilatte, who did not expect such [a] crucial test, reached Ceylon before the investigation was over, and he had thus to wait for over nine months in [sic] the island. No imposition and no fraud could have been dreamt of under such a vehement investigation': 'Mar Timotheos's Consecration', *Western Mail*, 7 January 1899, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Parry, *Six Months In A Syrian Monastery*, pp. 61-2, 68, 69-70.

### **Mar Alvares: Kindred Campaigner And Vilatte's Consecrator**

Francisco-Antonio Xavier Alvares was born in Verna, Goa on 29 April 1836 and ordained a Roman Catholic priest in Bombay on 6 November 1864.<sup>62</sup> Alvares became a leader of the Padroado Defence Association, an organised resistance to the 1886 concordat between the Vatican and Portugal abolishing the Padroado, the arrangement between the Portuguese and the Vatican which gave the Portuguese monarch a role in governing Roman Catholic churches in its colonial holdings, and placing the Goan Roman Catholics under the jurisdiction of the Propaganda Fide. Between 1887, when the Padroado was abolished, and 1888, when Fr. Alvares led his followers into the Syrian Orthodox Church, they campaigned hard for the restoration of the Padroado. Mar Dionysius V appointed Alvares Apostolic Prefect on 15 August 1888, anticipating the approval of Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV to consecrate him. The Patriarchal Bull authorising Alvares' consecration was signed on 25 January 1889 and Mar Dionysius consecrated him on 29 July 1889.

Whereas much of our analysis of the Patriarch's support for Vilatte must be reasonable speculation, both direct and indirect sources express Mar Alvares'

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<sup>62</sup> Kamat, Pratima, P, 'Remembering H G Alvares: Mar Julius', *The Navhind Times*, 29 April 2012, <http://www.navhindtimes.in/panorama/remembering-h-g-alvares-mar-julius> [retrieved: 5 July 2014, 12:00]

reasons for supporting Vilatte's consecration. Vilatte first wrote to Mar Alvares on 20 January 1891, but unfortunately this letter has not been published, nor is it found in available archives. We do, however, have Mar Alvares' reply dated 10 May 1891, and published in *My Relations With the Protestant Episcopal Church*.<sup>63</sup> At Mar Alvares' direction, his Vicar General A. A. de Souza wrote to Grafton on 4 September 1891 to decry Grafton's un-christian attacks on Vilatte's character, and to assure him that Mar Alvares would consecrate Vilatte 'even if he were the sole Old Catholic in America'.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, Stephen de Silva, Mar Alvares' secretary wrote to Grafton on 5 September 1891, declaring himself pleased 'to defend a persecuted priest of the ancient and apostolic church',<sup>65</sup> and had the letter published in a number of newspapers in Wisconsin, including the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*. In it de Silva chastises Grafton for his ongoing and slanderous attack on Vilatte's character. 'Not being satisfied with your sad defeat in America you have attempted to prejudice the minds of the authorities in Colombo against Fr. Vilatte. If I am correctly informed your animosity ran so high as to have dispatched a telegram against Fr. Vilatte as "untrustworthy". Perhaps it never occurred to you the the Oriental nations could not be easily deceived'.<sup>66</sup> De Silva, in the same letter, criticised the Protestant Grafton's 'pretensions to become the superior of a true Catholic priest'.<sup>67</sup> The implication that

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<sup>63</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>64</sup> Fond du Lac Archive, Letters, de Souza to Grafton, 4 September 1891.

<sup>65</sup> 'An Old Catholic Bishop', *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 8 October 1891, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> 'An Old Catholic Bishop', *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 8 October 1891, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> 'An Old Catholic Bishop', *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 8 October 1891, p. 3.

Grafton was not a real Catholic would no doubt fuel his anger at Vilatte, which was originally sparked by the Dutch Old Catholics. Letters Mar Alvares wrote to Fr. Ignatius in 1899, which were published in the Welsh newspaper *Western Mail*, provide additional confirmation of his attitudes, for example, to the interference of Protestants in orthodox Catholic affairs, and the need to extend the spread of Old Catholicism.<sup>68</sup>

Alvares revealed to Vilatte his opposition to 'Romanism' in his first letter. 'We from the bottom of our hearts thank God that He has mercifully shown us the way out of the slavery of Rome; and we rejoice to see a large number of true Christians making heroic efforts in the same direction as ourselves in the New World.'<sup>69</sup> He had served as a Roman Catholic priest for 23 years before joining the Syrian Orthodox Church in 1887, leading his followers to do the same the following year.<sup>70</sup> The dissolution of the Padroado, and the introduction of the Propaganda as the ecclesiastical authority instead, served as the catalyst for Alvares' conversion to the Syrian Church in 1887. He had long campaigned against the oppression of colonialism, and in favour of native Indian nationalism. Demands to conform to European ecclesial customs reinforced for Alvares and his followers their belief that

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<sup>68</sup> 'Mar Timotheos's Consecration', *Western Mail*, 7 January 1899, p. 6; 'Father Ignatius', *Western Mail*, 20 July 1899, p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 51.

<sup>70</sup> Pratima P. Kamat, 'The Goa-Ceylon Religious Connection: A Review Of "The Indian Cry" of Alvares Mar Julius, Archbishop Of Ceylon, Goa and India', *Sabaragamuwa University Journal*, 12 (December, 2013), 61-82 (p. 70).

this was just another form of colonial discrimination. Alvares used his considerable journalistic energies to promote economic self sufficiency, urging people to cultivate, produce, and purchase native products in lieu of foreign (colonial) imports. This enthusiasm for Asian self sufficiency carried over into his theology. Alvares believed, in opposition to Roman Catholic teaching, that the East was the 'depository' of all Christian truth.<sup>71</sup> In 1893, Alvares published *Antioch And Rome*, in which he argued that because Asia was the site of divine revelation, the Patriarch of Antioch had precedence as the leader of the church, not the Bishop of Rome.<sup>72</sup> Alvares, like Vilatte, came to believe that the Roman Catholic Church had ignored Scripture and Patristic teachings and 'invented, and is ever inventing un-Christian, new and unauthorised doctrines for the belief of Christendom as articles of faith.'<sup>73</sup> While the dissolution of the Padroado served as the catalyst for Alvares' emerging opposition to Roman Catholicism, he quickly became a champion of Syrian Orthodoxy as the original Catholic church and the hope of all those seeking freedom for a national expression of Christianity.<sup>74</sup>

Mar Alvares was certainly also no friend to Protestantism.

Save and except the Old Catholic and other Orthodox branches of the Eastern

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<sup>71</sup> 'Conversion Of England', *Western Mail*, 29 May 1900, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> Kamat, 'Goa-Ceylon Religious Connection', p. 69.

<sup>73</sup> 'Father Ignatius', *Western Mail*, 20 July 1899, p. 6.

<sup>74</sup> 'Father Ignatius', *Western Mail*, 20 July 1899, p. 6.



Churches, the whole of Europe is sunk in the greater heresies at the present day. ...the different denominations of Protestants take it upon themselves to suppress the true doctrines of the Universal Church, and thereby lead themselves, step by step, into the greatest heresies and other confusion bordering on unbelief.<sup>75</sup>

Not only did he object to Protestantism on theological grounds, but he also viewed it as the agent of colonial powers. The Dutch East India Company ruled Ceylon from 1658 to 1796, and introduced Calvinism.<sup>76</sup> The British were the colonial power in India at that time, and Protestant missionaries were active throughout the country. At the time of Vilatte's consecration it had been only fifteen years since the Patriarch's visit to India when he officially ended Anglican interference there in Syrian church affairs. The idea that the Protestant Grafton pressed his claim of authority over Vilatte, a Catholic and orthodox priest, clearly offended Mar Alvares and his advisers.<sup>77</sup>

Alvares, like Mar Dionysius and the Patriarch, was keen to spread Eastern Christianity to the West. He wrote to Fr. Ignatius in March, 1899:

The Old Catholics and others under the Eastern Church now in Europe do not

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<sup>75</sup> 'Father Ignatius', *Western Mail*, 20 July 1899, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Kamat, 'Goa-Ceylon Religious Connection', pp. 62-63.

<sup>77</sup> 'Mar Timotheos's Consecration', *Western Mail*, 7 January 1899, p. 6.

carry out their propaganda extensively so as to increase their strength, and if they remain any longer in the present state their existence in Europe will hardly be of any use. Many of these Churches, in order to live in friendship with Rome and other Protestant denominations, do not attempt to carry on their mission beyond their present limit. This is wrong in every respect.<sup>78</sup>

In his letter to Vilatte in May, 1891, Alvares celebrates the 'heroic efforts' of believers in the New World seeking Catholic orthodoxy, and recalls his friend Dr. Lisboa Pinto's admonition to him 'forget everything and think of America'.<sup>79</sup> Alvares not only sought to spread orthodox Catholicism in the West, and in the virgin mission field of North America, but also sought to convert Roman Catholics and Anglicans. Writing to Fr. Bentham, who had just returned to England from a visit with Vilatte in Paris, Mar Alvares states: 'Allow me to declare once more that we earnestly desire the union of England to our mother, the Holy Eastern Church, under the principle '*in necessaries unitas*' as the East is the depository of every truth connected with Christianity.'<sup>80</sup> In a letter to Fr. Ignatius, Alvares writes 'I am anxiously praying to God that the Orthodox Church, already begun in your historic abbey, may spread throughout the United Kingdom, and thereby be the means of bringing home the unadulterated truths of Christianity to the millions who now wander outside its

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<sup>78</sup> 'Father Ignatius', *Western Mail*, 20 July 1899, p. 6.

<sup>79</sup> Vilatte, *My Relations*, p. 51.

<sup>80</sup> 'Conversion Of England', *Western Mail*, 29 May 1900, p. 4.

pale.’<sup>81</sup> His support of Vilatte’s consecration then was as another missionary bishop who would (and did) spread Independent Catholicism beyond the traditional geographic boundaries of the Syrian church, to America and Europe.

Vilatte spent nearly a year in Ceylon between 22 August 1891 - 8 June 1892. While waiting for official approval for his consecration, Vilatte did not waste his time. He worked as energetically among the Independent Catholics in Colombo as he did among his own congregations in Wisconsin. Vilatte celebrated liturgy on Christmas Eve 1891 in the cathedral.<sup>82</sup> He wed Francis Quin and Margaret Pereira in the Cathedral at Hultsdorf in January 1892, and observed the feast of the Purification of Mary on 2 February 1892.<sup>83</sup> He had a prominent role in the cathedral observances of Holy Week and Easter 1892.<sup>84</sup> During his stay he continued to correspond with Old Catholic colleagues in Europe, as well as coordinating with his community in the United States, including the installation of a plaque celebrating Bishop Brown in the parish in Dyckesville.<sup>85</sup> This time living and working within Mar Alvares’ community gave Alvares and his advisers the opportunity to engage with Vilatte, and to confirm their support for him and the Independent Catholic mission in

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<sup>81</sup> ‘Father Ignatius’, *Western Mail*, 20 July 1899, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Midnight Mass At The Hultsdorf Cathedral’, *The Independent Catholic*, January 1892, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Another Benedict[ion]’, *The Independent Catholic*, February 1892, p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Holy Week’, *The Independent Catholic*, April 1892, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> ‘The Late Bishop of Fond du Lac’, *The Independent Catholic*, Colombo, May 1892, p. 3.

America; confirmation which Alvares no doubt communicated to the other Indian bishops when they met in Trichur in late January or early February 1892 to finalise arrangements for Vilatte's consecration<sup>86</sup> and to the Patriarch.

Syrian support for Vilatte was not haphazard, but carefully considered and strategic. Vilatte was the third special project of Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV designed to spread orthodoxy beyond the confines of the Ottoman empire, and to join the fray of competing nineteenth century missionary endeavours. Their experiences with the interference of Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries in Syrian church affairs made the Patriarch and Mar Alvares sympathetic to Vilatte's plight. It was clear, both from his published statements, and from his activities while resident in Colombo, that Vilatte shared their goals and as such it comes as no surprise that they consecrated him. The lack of a staticon and the consecration of Vilatte as Metropolitan of North America, however, was a surprise, but seems to have been a strategic choice on the part of the Patriarch who, just as he sent Ferrette to England as unfettered as possible, appears to have done the same with Vilatte, giving him both full authority and as much freedom as possible to operate independently in a far off, virgin mission territory.

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<sup>86</sup> 'News', *The Independent Catholic*, February 1892, p. 3. 'These nine months of acquaintance with him [Vilatte] have convinced us of the true worth of the new Archbishop...': 'The Most Rev. Archbishop Vilatte', *The Independent Catholic*, May 1892, p. 1.

## 8: Why Vilatte Reconciled With Rome — Or Did He?

Perhaps the most controversial, and puzzling events of Vilatte's career are the three times he attempted to reconcile with the Roman Catholic Church in 1894, 1899, and finally in 1925-29. Vilatte offered little or nothing to explain each attempt. Before, and during, each of them, Vilatte continued his work for the Independent Catholic cause. Finally, all three attempts, including the last in his final years, failed, and ended with Vilatte admitting that he had made a mistake. The traditional narratives focus mostly on the last two attempts in 1899 and 1925-29, and the first in 1894 is treated not as a separate incident, but as the point of origin for the attempt in 1899.<sup>1</sup> The received story is that Vilatte, dispirited, destitute, chased by creditors, and seeking personal recognition, crawled back to Rome in the hope that they would acknowledge him. These accounts, because they took neither Catholic reform nor Vilatte's commitment to it seriously, have coloured all subsequent assessments of

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<sup>1</sup> Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, p. 36; Marx, 'Vilatte and Rome', pp. 114-116, 119; Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 110-111, 118, 126.

Vilatte and his career. A close examination of under-utilised existing material, new material, and the timelines throws light on these events, and more importantly the people involved, and questions the traditional narratives. This chapter examines each of the three occasions when Vilatte negotiated with Rome and asks two questions. First, why did he do it, and secondly, did he do so having had a change of conviction or thinking regarding his campaign for Catholic reform? What emerges is a sense that Vilatte's three attempts at reconciliation with Rome were not, as has traditionally been asserted, driven by him, but that he was pressured (as in 1894), or pursued and persuaded, as appears to be the case in 1899 and 1925. If successful, it would have been a public relations coup for Rome, as was widely publicised in 1899. However, none of the three attempts were successful — indeed, Vilatte was apparently about to walk away once again in 1929 when he died.

#### **1894: Wisconsin Independent Catholics Ask Vilatte to Seek Reconciliation with Rome**

The first attempt to reconcile occurred between March and August 1894. It is interesting because, unlike the two subsequent occasions, Vilatte's own congregation of St. Mary's, Dyckesville, and not a Roman Catholic official, was responsible for urging him to approach Archbishop Satolli and Bishop Messmer. Three factors appear to have influenced their wish that Vilatte seek reconciliation with the Roman

Catholic Church: the arrival of the first Apostolic Delegate, Francesco Satolli and his mission to resolve the problem of independentism within the American church; Dominic Kolasinski and his congregation having agreed terms for their reconciliation with Rome in February 1894; and hints that the Vatican was reaching out to the Dutch Old Catholics. Marx, though he admits that Vilatte's lifestyle was neither 'intemperate nor gravely lecherous' so as to exhaust his modest financial means, concluded that 'his fundamental vice must have been pride sired by ignorance. He wanted to be an object of attraction, and, if Rome would have allowed him to be bishop, he would gladly have become vociferously "Ultramontane"'.<sup>2</sup> Anson describes how, try as he might, Vilatte could not build a large enough following. 'But whenever he heard of dissatisfaction about church regulations, and so on, he was sure to turn up, organizing meetings, urging the people to throw off the yoke of Rome.'<sup>3</sup> His fund-raising was just as unsuccessful. 'In spite of all this propaganda, Vilatte did not even manage to make ends meet, and he was obliged to flee from one place to another to avoid creditors, who were on his track.'<sup>4</sup> Anson alludes to Vilatte's lack of recognition suggesting that his having not been invited to play a significant role at the WPR was just such a snub.<sup>5</sup> Thus, 'at the end of his tether less than two years after being consecrated, Vilatte decided that the best thing

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<sup>2</sup> Marx, 'Vilatte and Rome', p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 111.

he could do was to be reconciled with the Roman Church.’<sup>6</sup> The evidence, however, does not support this narrative. Only weeks before he approached Satolli (or possibly Messmer, there is no clear indication in the material currently available) Vilatte purchased land planning to organise a new congregation.<sup>7</sup> He was still cooperating with the Polish independents, and assisting them to organise a conference in August 1894.<sup>8</sup> There is, therefore, no indication that Vilatte was dispirited or ready to abandon his risky Independent Catholic project for the more secure Roman Catholic Church. Why then did Vilatte write to Satolli seeking terms, and why did the attempted reconciliation fail?

Two letters, one Vilatte wrote to the editor of the Independent on 16 January 1898, the other written to Bishop Messmer of Green Bay by the trustees of St. Mary’s Old Catholic Church in Dyckesville Wisconsin on 7 August 1894, offer two separate explanations for Vilatte’s having approached Satolli. They are not contradictory, and provide a framework for explaining the 1894 attempt. Vilatte, in his letter, denies recent rumours that he was then seeking reconciliation and that on a previous attempt Rome refused him. The source of the rumours remains unknown. He admits to approaching Messmer in 1894, explaining that his doing so was in response to the Pope’s overtures to the Old Catholic Church in Europe with the mission of making

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<sup>6</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 111.

<sup>7</sup> *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 24 February 1894, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Messmer, 21 July 1894.



peace and receiving the Old Catholic Church back into the Roman communion.

In reply to the invitation of the Pope addressed to the Old Catholics who, in 1894, were plotting with the Delegate of the Pope in Holland, I approached Bishop Messmer, who offered me all possible advantages to visit the Pope, and to pay all my expenses if necessary for my voyage to Rome, if I was willing to accept the Roman faith.<sup>9</sup>

Vilatte had friends and sympathisers amongst the European Old Catholics, and it is likely that one or more of his correspondents shared the information with him.

Vilatte impressed upon readers that the Roman Church, like any church, will only accept those who are willing to accept its rules and doctrines.

Negotiations between Vilatte, his congregation, and Bishop Messmer were slow. It is clear, from the available exchange of letters, that the trustees of St. Mary's were attempting to negotiate favourable arrangements, using the recent case of Dominic Kolasinski and his Polish independent congregation as a point of reference. They may have been under the impression that Kolasinski's reconciliation with Rome was easier than in fact it had been, as Satolli imposed it upon Bishop Foley of Detroit against his wishes. On 7 August, only weeks before the talks collapsed, the trustees of St. Mary's vented their frustration in a letter to Messmer, focusing on his role in the lack of progress. 'There was a time when the Good Shepherd would look for the

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<sup>9</sup> J. R. Vilatte, *The Independent*, 3 February 1898, p. 18.

lost sheep and would carry it back with care on his shoulders. Now-a-days the lost sheep (you at least so regard us) look for the shepherd, and you repel them. What a difference between the Christianity of Christ and that of the Pope.'<sup>10</sup> This line not only expressed their frustration, it suggests that the congregation had not surrendered its Old Catholic identity and hints at the key passage where they admit that they urged Vilatte to approach Satolli. 'We deplore bitterly to have caused our Archbishop to make overtures to you and we promise that in future we shall give better heed to his advice.'<sup>11</sup> The trustees close their angry letter giving thanks to God 'that our Archbishop has not fallen by our mistake into the trap in which Father Kolasinski finds himself kept.'<sup>12</sup> In other words, Vilatte and the trustees had refused to agree to the terms and conditions which Messmer set out. From this letter, it is clear that Vilatte was not the one who instigated the approach to Satolli and Messmer, and that he advised against it when the congregation pressed him to do so. Though it took them a few months, they came to agree with Vilatte, and regretted having forced him seeking terms with the Roman Catholic Church.

Satolli, in addition to having been charged with ending the independentism of immigrant priests like Dominic Kolasinski, was also charged with ending Vilatte's Independent Catholic movement in the United States. A report in the *Literary Digest* of 12 May 1894, one of the few contemporary public mentions of Vilatte having

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<sup>10</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Nicholas Pleimling to Messmer, 7 August 1894.

<sup>11</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Nicholas Pleimling to Messmer, 7 August 1894.

<sup>12</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Nicholas Pleimling to Messmer, 7 August 1894.

approached Satolli, confirms this part of his remit. 'Mgr. Satolli has spent no little time in trying to heal the divisions existing in the Catholic Church in this country...It is part of his desire also to effect a reconciliation with the members of the Old Catholic Church...and is said that Archbishop Vilatte has placed himself in communication with the Papal Delegate.'<sup>13</sup> His letters to Messmer during the negotiations with Vilatte suggest that Satolli was under pressure from the Vatican to bring a swift closure to the situation.<sup>14</sup> Who approached whom? Roman officials wanted to give the appearance that the independents and other schismatics like Vilatte were supplicants, and made the first move. However, there is a hint that this was not always the case. *The San Francisco Call*, of 24 January 1893 reported that Satolli approached Kolasinski and summoned him to Washington. Did Satolli write to Vilatte? Unfortunately no available evidence addresses this question, but at one point Satolli did write to Messmer on 27 May that: 'At present I deem it necessary that he come to Washington.'<sup>15</sup> The letter is also interesting for, as with Kolasinski, Satolli is concerned to convert Vilatte's flock, as well as the schismatic cleric.

We can now, for the first time, assemble a plausible explanation for Vilatte having approached Satolli and Messmer in 1894 seeking terms of reconciliation. There appears to have been an opening via the Old Catholics in Europe, Satolli's mission to

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<sup>13</sup> 'The Old-Catholic Movement In America', *The Literary Digest*, 12 May 1894, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> 'This matter would not only please me very much but also the Congregation de Propaganda which expressed its wish to me that this procedure come to a speedy completion': AT Collection, Letters, Satolli to Messmer, 4 August 1894.

<sup>15</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Satolli to Messmer, 27 May 1894.

the United States included instructions to bring an end to the Independent Catholic movement, and Kolasinski's reconciliation on favourable terms (for his congregation at least) encouraged the trustees of St. Mary's Old Catholic Church in Dyckesville to urge Vilatte to investigate the possibility of reunion with Rome. As they themselves reported, he was not in favour, but because Vilatte was committed to his ecclesial model — whereby the congregation had a significant voice in the affairs of the church — he complied with their wish, even though he warned them that it was not a good idea.

Messmer suspected that neither Vilatte nor his flock were fully prepared to submit to the Roman Catholic Church. Rumours casting doubt on Vilatte's conviction regarding his proposed reconciliation with Rome appear to have circulated early. In a letter to Messmer dated 17 April, Vilatte informed him that preparations of the congregation were progressing and reassuring Messmer that the rumours were unfounded. 'Pay no attention to the false and stupid news circulating about. Believe in my sincerity and prudence.'<sup>16</sup> The fact is that, whatever shape the rumours, they contained some degree of truth. Throughout the negotiations Vilatte continued to organise Independent Catholic activity, namely the congress of the Polish independents which was to be held in Cleveland in August 1894. This was not a sudden development. Bishop Arthur Cleveland Coxe was, in part, responsible for

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<sup>16</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Messmer, 17 April 1894.

making introductions between Vilatte and the Polish independents in 1891, and Vilatte consecrated Kolasinski's newly built church in Detroit in 1893. Vilatte made no effort to hide this activity from Messmer, telling him in a letter of 21 July 1894 that Kolaszewski was due to arrive that day, and that two other 'delegates' from Toledo and Baltimore were due to arrive early the following week.<sup>17</sup> From Messmer's point of view, the evidence mounted that Vilatte had not in fact converted. He expressed his concern in a letter to Satolli, following what appears to have been Vilatte's first face to face meeting with Messmer. Vilatte visited Messmer on 3 May 1894 'making an engergetic protest against his returning to the Holy Catholic Church.'<sup>18</sup> It is difficult, given the letter's context, Messmer's initial assessment to Satolli, to determine if this is Messmer's own interpretation based on his interview with Vilatte, or if in fact Vilatte himself clearly expressed such sentiments.

In July, after having consulted Satolli in New York in June, Messmer drafted a proposed set of conditions for formalising Vilatte's reconciliation, and expressed the thinking behind them.<sup>19</sup> Messmer recognised that Vilatte's situation was substantively different from that of Kolasinski and the Polish independents; Vilatte

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<sup>17</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Messmer, 21 July 1894.

<sup>18</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Messmer to Satolli, May 1894.

<sup>19</sup> The collection of letters I have dates it August, but the timeline based on Satolli's letter to Messmer of 8 July, wherein he mentions their meeting in New York, and highlights elements of the proposed conditions, Vilatte's letter of 2 August to Messmer, that Messmer quoted in his late August letter to Satolli (for more on this see below), and Messmer's statement that Vilatte's letter arrived only a week after his initial correspondence, leads me to date this to sometime in the second half of July.

was not just a schismatic, he was an apostate. Messmer, possibly wishing to avoid the fiasco surrounding Kolasinski's submission in February, arranged Vilatte's submission such that there could be no room for Vilatte to manoeuvre.<sup>20</sup> 'If Msgr. Vilatte is in good faith concerning his conversion and return to the Holy Church, and if he desires to persevere, it is absolutely necessary that he should fully realise his position and the nature of his apostasy from the Catholic Church.'<sup>21</sup> Vilatte, having been an Independent Catholic, denied central Roman Catholic doctrines which, in Messmer's thinking at least, 'is giving up the whole Catholic faith.'<sup>22</sup> Messmer was emphatic that Vilatte:

...either believes the Roman Catholic Church to be the true Church of Christ, or he does not. In the last case his intended return would be a farce or comedy; in the first, his return must be absolute and unconditional...If Msgr. Vilatte is not ready to be reconciled with Holy Church in such an unreserved and frank spirit, his conversion is not sincere.<sup>23</sup>

Messmer, although he took a hard line in respect of formalising Vilatte's submission, seems to have had a sympathetic assessment of Vilatte telling Satolli, after his initial interview: 'he is an excellent French orator, a man of attractive

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<sup>20</sup> 'Kolasinski', *Detroit Free Press*, 19 February 1894, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> This document is not addressed, but it is signed like a letter, and is arranged as a mix of proposed instructions to Vilatte, and encouragement from Messmer to Vilatte: AT Collection, Letters, Messmer to Vilatte (?), August 1894.

<sup>22</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Messmer to Vilatte (?), August 1894.

<sup>23</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Messmer to Vilatte (?), August 1894.

manners and good countenance, as Your Eminence will notice yourself.'<sup>24</sup> Though Messmer did have concerns about Vilatte's conviction to return to the Roman Catholic Church, he appears to have taken the view that Vilatte's skill as a missionary, and his desire to continue in ministry, were worth cultivating, provided that he was re-educated as a true Roman Catholic. Messmer integrated this idea into his proposed plan for Vilatte's formal submission. 'Moreover, to be admitted to the exercise of the sacred ministry, he must first prepare himself by theological studies. What classical, philosophical and theological studies has Vilatte ever made?'<sup>25</sup> We know that Vilatte was educated, and that his teachers and fellow students thought well of him. What is more, Vilatte was examined by Protestants, Old Catholics, and the Russian and Syrian Orthodox. He was not, however, a student of the neo-Thomism of Roman Catholic seminaries of the day. This meant that Vilatte was not grounded in the methods and doctrinal thinking that Messmer expected. Messmer blamed Vilatte's 'apostasy' on what he determined was Vilatte's lack of instruction in correct theology. 'In some way Vilatte ought to be excused for his schismatic adventures; his ignorance in theology seems to be most stupendous. It seems he never studied theology. It is said that he does not know the Latin language at all.'<sup>26</sup> Messmer must have known Vilatte's educational background. It was in the papers, and no doubt it was a topic he discussed with Vilatte during their interviews. By

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<sup>24</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Messmer to Satolli, May 1894.

<sup>25</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Messmer to Vilatte (?), August 1894.

<sup>26</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Messmer to Satolli, May 1894.

making his re-education a condition of his formal reconciliation, Messmer sought not only to test Vilatte's conviction and conversion, but also to purge him of his heretical views.

The letters we now have, which Vilatte sent to Messmer between April and August 1894, suggest that Messmer's suspicions were justified. Vilatte discusses the process of bringing his congregation into union with the Roman Catholic Church but is silent on his theological and ecclesiological reasons for wanting to do so. In a letter dated 17 April, Vilatte writes to Messmer, 'I have the happiness of preparing in a spirit of peace and reconciliation, the great majority of my people. With the help of God and the protection of the Holy Mother, I have the firm conviction that everything will happen for the better.'<sup>27</sup> Though conciliatory, Vilatte's letters in no way express a change in his theological convictions, as he did in letters to Bishop Brown in 1885, Hyacinthe Loyson between 1884 and 1885, and even the Dutch Old Catholics between 1889 and 1890. By focussing on process, Vilatte was seeking to realign his flock with the Roman Catholic institution, without, it seems, appropriating the particular doctrines and attitudes that offended them. The congregation demanded that Vilatte remain their pastor. Satolli was willing to concede this, as long as Messmer approved, and Vilatte was first sent away for an unspecified period

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<sup>27</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Messmer, 17 April 1894.



of retreat and re-education.<sup>28</sup> Vilatte argued that if he were away from the congregation too long, it would 'be at the mercy of the first possible fool.'<sup>29</sup> No doubt, in order to reinforce their loyalty, Messmer would have installed a priest of his choosing, one who would have begun to challenge and change the beliefs and practices of the Independent Catholic community, beginning by replacing French with Latin as the liturgical language, and stripping the lay trustees of their authority within the congregation. In effect the plan would be to re-educate them, so that if or when Vilatte did return, there would be no quarter for his heretical ideas. If Vilatte, at the behest of his congregation, could successfully make it a condition of their reunion with the Roman Church that he remain with the congregation, then they might, or so they hoped, preserve a degree of their Independent Catholic thinking, and identity. Vilatte was used to a broad spectrum of what it meant to be Catholic, a liberty he believed was expressed in the ideals of free America. It is unlikely that he could have comfortably accepted the more confined Roman thinking which he had campaigned against for the last decade. Vilatte and his congregation were not likely to accept re-education, therefore, whatever Messmer hoped and planned.

Messmer wrote to Satolli at the end of August admitting defeat, and complaining

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<sup>28</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Satolli to Messmer, 8 July 1894; AT Collection, Letters, Satolli to Messmer, 4 August 1894.

<sup>29</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Messmer, 19 May 1894.

of Vilatte's continued Independent Catholic activity during the negotiations.<sup>30</sup>

Vilatte, he wrote, ordered the publication of a new prayerbook and catechism, and bought more land for a new church building in Green Bay. In addition, so Messmer suggested, he had secretly received Kolaszewski, aiding his organising of the schismatic Independent Poles in Cleveland. We do not have contemporary material expressing Vilatte's point of view at this time. The only source is the letter to the editor of the *Independent* which he wrote five years later. In it he praised Messmer for his kindness and consideration in 1894, but suggests that he was not prepared to accept the Roman Church's terms. 'Under any circumstance the Roman Catholic Church will refuse to accept any person unwilling to admit her conditions', he wrote. 'I approached Bishop Messmer, who offered me all possible advantages to visit the Pope, and to pay all my expenses if necessary for my voyage to Rome, if I was willing to accept the Roman faith.'<sup>31</sup> We can glean additional information from the letter to Messmer from the trustees of St. Mary's dated 7 August 1894. In addition to admitting that they were responsible for urging Vilatte to make the approach, they also expressed their exasperation with what they saw as Messmer's lack of enthusiasm for their joining the Roman Church.<sup>32</sup>

Messmer's attitude might be explained, in part, by his strategy. Satolli, in his

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<sup>30</sup> The letter is not given a day, but in the context, it must have been after the Cleveland conference held between 19 and 21 August 1894: AT Collection, Letters, Messmer to Satolli, August 1894.

<sup>31</sup> J. R. Vilatte, *The Independent*, 3 February 1898, p. 18 (emphasis in original).

<sup>32</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Nicholas Pleimling to Messmer, 7 August 1894.

management of Kolasinski's submission, approached it not just as a blow to the independents, but was also concerned to reclaim Kolasinski's large congregation for the Roman Church. Satolli also expressed the same concern that Vilatte's submission ought to include his followers. In a letter to Messmer of 27 May 1894 Satolli wrote: 'I entreat you to try as much as possible to continue to reconcile him [Vilatte] as well as his followers with the Church, and then place him in some good convent, for which I shall try to assist you by writing the Congregation of the Propaganda.'<sup>33</sup> Messmer, in his handling of Vilatte, knew that it was not a simple matter of reconciliation and submission, but required a full conversion. Vilatte, unlike Kolasinski, had never been a Roman Catholic priest. In order to achieve that, it seems he believed that it was more important to fully indoctrinate Vilatte, and that his followers were of secondary importance, as he suggested to Vilatte when setting out the terms for his submission: 'Your own return to the church must not depend on whenever others will follow [you] or not. Be first reconciled to God and His Church yourself, and if such be God's will and design, He will bring your former adherents back also, whether by your own efforts or those of another.'<sup>34</sup>

Vilatte's successful conversion and submission would have removed a competing source of apostolic orders outside of Rome's control in North America. Messmer would not only have brought an end to the Independent Catholic movement within the United States, but he would have also dealt a crippling blow to the Polish

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<sup>33</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Satolli to Messmer, 27 May 1894.

<sup>34</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Messmer to Vilatte (?), August 1894.

independents. Vilatte was not prepared to help Messmer achieve this in 1894, just as, in September the following year, he refused to give the Poles cover because they rejected key features of Catholic reform.<sup>35</sup> Though the 1894 effort failed, we learn three important things. Firstly, Vilatte would not surrender the Independent Catholic agenda. Secondly, he did not seek reunion with Rome of his own accord. Thirdly, after Vilatte's consecration in 1892 the Vatican noticed him, and actively sought a means to bring him onside. It is this last point which is relevant to the next two attempts.

### **1899: Parisot, Fleming and the Second Failed Reconciliation**

Vilatte left for Europe in the summer of 1898, reportedly to develop contacts with

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<sup>35</sup> In a letter to Kolaszewski published in the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, Vilatte explained his decision to not attend the 12-13 September 1895 congress of independent Polish Catholics: 'So you have thus taken the resolution to stay firmly attached to the Roman doctrine and your movement becomes by this fact a deplorable revolt and act of insubordination against the authority of the Papal church in America. I supposed at the time of my visit to Cleveland [in 1894] that you felt in your hearts the need of a religious reform built upon the faith of the undivided church; but today, upon your declaration, I see my error, and am perfectly convinced that you are Roman Catholics who are at present plotting without any definite principles of good reform. So long as you will not publicly and frankly proclaim your separation from the Pope of Rome as the infallible chief of the universal church, and so long as you hold dear the dogmatic and disciplinary doctrines of the Roman church, which are contrary to the doctrines of the undivided church, believing them divine truths and incapable of being purified, I am obliged as archbishop of the Old Catholic church to absolutely refuse and recall the sanction which I gave your movement a year ago': 'Refuses To Be Their Puppet', *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 6 September 1895, p. 1.

other Catholic reformers. There is no hint that he planned to submit to Rome until a few weeks before 7 February 1899, when the French Roman Catholic newspaper *La Croix* reported that Vilatte had recanted his errors in Rome a few days earlier, on the second of the month.<sup>36</sup> Vilatte's activity before his trip to Europe, and indeed before it was announced that he was in Rome in January, was not that of one preparing to submit to the Roman Catholic Church, but the opposite; he had been pursuing an expansionist agenda, working hard to establish Independent Catholicism both in the US and in Europe. It is this fact that makes the sudden announcement of his recantation all the more surprising. Who or what persuaded him to seemingly suddenly seek reunion with Rome? Unlike the attempts in 1894 and 1925, we do not have material that explicitly attributes responsibility for Vilatte's reconciliation to particular individuals. However, the evidence strongly suggests that two figures, Dom Jean Parisot, and Fr. David Fleming, possibly with different mandates, were key to Vilatte's visit to Rome in January 1899. Vilatte would not have considered submitting without certain assurances. Based on the account of his 1894 attempt, at least one of those would have been that he be allowed to continue to work in ministry. What other inducements might have been offered we can only speculate. However, those terms would play a role in the 1925 effort to bring Vilatte back into the Roman Catholic fold.<sup>37</sup> We do not know in detail why, by the end of December

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<sup>36</sup> 'Conversion Remarquable', *La Croix*, 7 February 1899, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Hamelin, Jean, *Le père Eugène Prévost (1860-1946): Fondateur de la Fraternité Sacerdotale et des Oblates de Béthanie* (Quebec: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1999), p. 332.

1899 Vilatte walked away from the negotiations. From his public statements, however, it is clear that he concluded at the time that the assurances he received would not be fulfilled. Perhaps remembering his experience with the European Old Catholics in 1888-1890, Vilatte cut his losses and walked away.

Before he left for Europe in 1898, Vilatte had been busy pushing ahead with pastoral work and laying the groundwork for future developments. On Sunday, 20 March 1898, in Buffalo, at a large gathering, he consecrated Stephen Kaminski.<sup>38</sup> The next two Sundays, 27 March<sup>39</sup> and 3 April, 1898<sup>40</sup> Vilatte confirmed over 200 people at St. Mary's parish, also in Buffalo, New York. In June, Vilatte purchased land in Canada near Lake Erie, on which to build a seminary.<sup>41</sup> Earlier in the year Vilatte had been forced to sell the church in Green Bay to pay off a debt to its builder.<sup>42</sup> This was not an uncommon occurrence with churches in the nineteenth century. The auction of church land, and his purchase of land in Canada four months later, near the New York, Pennsylvania border suggest that he was shifting the focus of church operations eastward. Vilatte's activity in the three months before he left for Europe does not give the impression that he was dispirited, questioning his commitment to

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<sup>38</sup> 'Polish Catholics', *The Buffalo Commercial*, 21 March 1898, p. 10; 'Is A Bishop Now', *Buffalo Morning Express And Illustrated Buffalo Express*, 21 March 1898, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> 'Class Confirmed', *The Buffalo Express*, 28 March 1898, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> 'Many Were Confirmed', *The Buffalo Commercial*, 4 April 1898, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> *The Weekly Wisconsin*, 29 January 1898, p. 6.

Catholic reform or preparing to reconcile with the Roman Catholic Church. On the contrary, Vilatte was responding to the evolving shape of his Independent Catholic mission in North America and planning for the future.

Vilatte departed England in August 1898. His plan, according to Parisot, included visits to France and Old Believers in Austria and Romania, and accepting the invitations of Bishops Vladimir and Nicholas to visit them in Russia.<sup>43</sup> Margrander, echoing Vilatte's activity before his departure, adds that Vilatte's goal during his European tour was to 'consult with advisers regarding his future course'.<sup>44</sup> Who those advisers might have been, in addition to Archbishops Nicholas and Vladimir, remains a mystery, though Loyson is a likely candidate. Whether or not Vilatte realised some or all of these planned visits is unclear; in the four months between departing England and his arrival at Ligugé in November, it is possible that he did. It is certain, however, that a visit to Rome was not part of his intended itinerary and that his principal aim was to cultivate existing and new relationships with like-minded clerics across Europe. At this stage of the story, there was no hint or suggestion that Vilatte planned to renounce his Independent Catholic convictions in

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<sup>43</sup> 'Il se disposa à visiter ensuite l'Autriche et la Roumanie, où résident des évêques des Vieux-croyants (Rasklowick) et la Russie, où l'ont plusieurs fois invité les évêques Vladimir et Nicolas et d'autres dignitaires, et où il se proposait de faire sur place une étude de l'orthodoxie russe': Parisot, *Monseigneur Vilatte*, p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> Ernest Christian Margrander was Vilatte's Chancellor and the author of the biographical sketch - entry about Vilatte in the Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge. Margrander's account, though favourable to Vilatte, largely concurs with independent source material: Margrander, 'Vilatte', pp. viii, 188.

favour of Roman Catholicism during his European tour.

What happened next appears to have hinged on one encounter in Paris.

Margrander's account says that: 'Being advised in Paris to visit Rome, after a retreat at the Benedictine monastery at Ligugé, Vilatte personally offered his acceptance of the plea of the pope to Eastern prelates for union with the Holy See'.<sup>45</sup> Who advised him Margrander does not say. It seems reasonable, however, to suggest that the invitation to visit Ligugé came from Dom Jean Parisot, a specialist in Oriental Christian music and liturgy, or from one of his close associates. Parisot's monastery, St. Martin's at Ligugé, had a sister foundation in Paris, which was founded in 1893. Was it a chance meeting, or did Parisot, discovering that Vilatte was in Paris, seek him out? If so, did he do so at the behest of a higher authority, or on his own account? Sadly, unlike the events of 1894 and 1925, we have no information about these crucial details. If Parisot was not directly responsible for the invitation to visit St. Martin's, he certainly took an interest in Vilatte's story after he arrived there, as evidenced by Parisot's publication of *Monseigneur Vilatte Fondateur de l'Église Vieille-Catholique Aux États-Unis D'Amérique* in 1899.

What was the papal plea to Eastern prelates mentioned by Margrander? Leo XIII was the reigning Pope in 1899.<sup>46</sup> He succeeded Pius IX, who did make a plea to the

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<sup>45</sup> Margrander, 'Vilatte', p. 188.

<sup>46</sup> His papacy spanned 20 Feb 1878 - 20 July 1903.



Eastern prelates to cease their schism and return to the one true church.<sup>47</sup> Pius IX's encyclical, however, was disseminated throughout the Ottoman empire five decades before Vilatte visited Rome in 1899. While Pius IX made a personal plea in that letter, it seems unlikely to be what Margrander refers to. Perhaps Leo XIII sent a personal message to Vilatte, not in writing but via a personal envoy, similar to what would later be done in 1925. If that were the case, then we might reasonably expect that there would have been references to such an envoy or message among the reports of Vilatte's submission and the subsequent fallout. A summary of Vilatte's work and submission, published in the July 1899 edition of the American Roman Catholic clerical journal, *American Ecclesiastical Review*, does not mention any such appeal or communication. Along with other reports, however, it attributes to Fr. David Fleming a prominent role in bringing about Vilatte's recantation.<sup>48</sup> As there is no mention of such a personal invitation on either side, it seems unlikely that Leo XIII did make a personal invitation, despite Margrander's reference to a papal plea. Perhaps Fr. Fleming, instructed by someone in the hierarchy, recalled Pius IX's encyclical to Vilatte as a means of persuading him to offer his submission. Pius made a number of promises in the text, including that of confirming clerics in their role and dignity.<sup>49</sup> If it meant that he could continue his missionary work as a uniate metropolitan, with the support of the Roman Catholic Church, Vilatte might have

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<sup>47</sup> *In Suprema Petri apostoli sede*, 6 January 1848.

<sup>48</sup> 'Recent Schismatical Movements', pp. 1-13.

<sup>49</sup> *In suprema Petri apostoli sede*, 6 January 1848.

been tempted. Just as it is unlikely that Leo XIII made a personal invitation to Vilatte, however, it is just as unlikely that Pius IX's letter from 1848 would have persuaded Vilatte, given that its tone confirmed everything about papal attitudes of supremacy that Vilatte found so offensive. Assuming that Margrander's entry is not misinformed, we are still left wondering what the personal plea might have been that persuaded Vilatte to present himself to Rome and eventually recant on 2 February 1899.

Parisot's 1899 account, while favourable to Vilatte, is bracketed by an introduction and conclusion written as an encouragement to other Roman Catholics to invite and facilitate the return of the Old Catholics and other independent bodies to the Roman Catholic Church. Much of the material in this text (letters and biographical information on Vilatte) suggests that Parisot interviewed Vilatte in person, while he stayed at the monastery at Ligugé late in 1899, and indeed the pamphlet may have been a collaboration between the two men designed to rehabilitate Vilatte in the eyes of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and possibly those of the French (and European) press. The emphasis is on the pastoral need of the Francophone immigrants in the United States and the preservation of their Catholicity in the face of Protestants, like Grafton, representing themselves as apostolic Catholics. Vilatte's stay there was the perfect opportunity for lengthy and persuasive conversations inviting the Archbishop back into communion with the

Roman Catholic Church under favourable terms. Parisot's language and clear purpose in his account of Vilatte's work suggest strongly that he was the unnamed adviser who persuaded Vilatte to visit Rome and seek re-union. The chronology of the contact between Vilatte and Parisot and Vilatte's recantation is also suggestive.

The correspondence between Fr. Ignatius and Mar Alvares in October and November 1898 included no indication that either suspected what Vilatte was about to do.<sup>50</sup> Later letters, exchanged in the spring of 1899, expressed both men's dismay at Vilatte's apparent submission to Roman Catholicism, and his betrayal of the Orthodox - Old Catholic ideals he had championed for more than a decade. This correspondence began after Fr. Ignatius sought clarification from Mar Alvares regarding Grafton's accusations that Vilatte's episcopal orders were invalid. Vilatte visited Llanthony Abbey in Wales between 18 and 28 July 1898, and ordained Fr. Ignatius on 27 July.<sup>51</sup> *The Church Times* published in its 5 August edition an excerpt from Llanthony Abbey's own account of Vilatte's visit, as well as an opinion piece, which described Fr. Ignatius' actions as a 'sad mistake'.<sup>52</sup> There followed a number of letters to the editor, some from Brother Gildas, a monk of Llanthony, who defended their decision. The editors of *The Church Times*, however in the 19 August

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<sup>50</sup> 'Mar Timotheos's Consecration', *Western Mail*, 7 January 1899, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> 'The Ordination Of Father Ignatius At Llanthony Abbey', *The Church Times*, 5 August 1898, p. 139.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Ordination Of Father Ignatius At Llanthony Abbey', *The Church Times*, 5 August 1898, p. 143.

edition stated that they were withholding publishing more letters until they received a response to their queries from America.<sup>53</sup> The editors contacted Grafton to ask for more information, and his account of events. His response was summarised in *The Church Times*, but published in full in the diocesan paper *The Diocese of Fond du Lac* in October 1898.<sup>54</sup> Ignatius, wanting to have clear answers about the validity of his orders, and to answer Anglican critics, wrote to Mar Alvares on 24 October 1898 asking him to reply to the accusations that Vilatte's consecration was invalid. Alvares replied on 21 November, answering all of Ignatius' questions, and adding his own criticism of Grafton. These letters, exchanged between Ignatius' ordination in the summer of 1898, and Vilatte's trip to Rome sometime in January 1899, show that neither Alvares nor Ignatius appear to have had suspicions about Vilatte's plans weeks before he was reported in Rome as being scrutinised by the Inquisition.

There is very little material available detailing Vilatte's activity between his submission in Rome on 2 February, and the end of December 1899. Margrander states that he made a retreat at the Trappist monastery Mt. Mellary in Ireland, but does not give us a date or length of his visit.<sup>55</sup> We have a letter Vilatte wrote from Rome published in the *Milwaukee Sunday Sentinel*, on 9 April 1899 in which Vilatte responds to comments Messmer made in an interview of 2 March (discussed

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<sup>53</sup> 'The Llanthony Ordination', *The Church Times*, 19 August 1898, p. 181.

<sup>54</sup> Charles C. Grafton, 'Statement Concerning Vilatte', *The Diocese Of Fond Du Lac*, October 1898, pp. 5-7.

<sup>55</sup> Margrander, 'Vilatte', p. 188.

below).<sup>56</sup> In the last days of December 1899, reports emerged from Rome that Vilatte, having had a disagreement with Roman Catholic authorities,<sup>57</sup> would not in fact be joining the Roman Church. What was the disagreement? Bishop Messmer gave an interview to the *Green Bay Post-Gazette* on 2 March 1899, a month after Rome announced Vilatte's submission. During the course of the interview, Messmer said two things that appear to foretell future events; firstly, that Vilatte's priestly orders were valid. Messmer told the reporter that, when he was in Rome the previous summer; 'I made particular inquiries regarding this matter and was told that Herzog's ordinations were considered valid.'<sup>58</sup> Regarding Vilatte's episcopal orders, Messmer is aware of the rumour circulated by Bishop Bonjean of Colombo that one of Alvares' consecrators was made 'bishop without ever having been ordained priest. Now this would make the whole succession in the episcopate practically very doubtful according to Catholic theology. However, I heard it stated that the Syrian bishop thus unlawfully consecrated was not among the spiritual ancestors or predecessors of Vilatte and that the mistake arose by confounding two bishops of the same name.'<sup>59</sup> Messmer admits that the authorities in Rome will need to sort that out, but until then, from a Roman Catholic perspective, Vilatte's episcopal acts

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<sup>56</sup> AT Collection, Letters, J. R. Vilatte to Editor, *Milwaukee Sunday Sentinel*, 9 April 1899 [draft?].

<sup>57</sup> 'Rejected By Rome, He Is Again A Wanderer', *The World*, 25 December 1899, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> 'Bishop S. G. Messmer Talks About Vilatte', *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 2 March 1899, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> 'Bishop S. G. Messmer Talks About Vilatte', *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 2 March 1899, p. 2.

would remain uncertain. The Syrian bishop here discussed is in fact the Mar Athanasius who, under the influence of Anglican missionaries, created the schism which led to Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV's trip to Britain in 1874. Based on Vilatte's later statements, Messmer's second statement is more important. The reporter asked him if Vilatte would be admitted to the hierarchy. 'Such hope would be vain. Even supposing his episcopal consecration to be valid, yet Rome will never allow him the honour and authority of the episcopate. After a long penance, giving assurance of his sincerity, he may be permitted to exercise some priestly functions within well defined limits, though I doubt if even that much will be granted him.'<sup>60</sup> That Vilatte had no intention of sitting in a monastery and not exercising his ministry, however, was clear as he led a very active missionary life for nearly twenty years.

We learn a number of things about how Vilatte understood the situation (as it resolved at the end of 1899) from his reply to Messmer. First, that Messmer and Satolli, along with Cardinal Rampolla, were involved in arranging Vilatte's submission in February 1899. Secondly Vilatte admits that this was a difficult experience: 'it must be plain to all unprejudiced minds that it is not an easy matter and at a moment's notice, especially for one in my position, to separate from priests and flock and sever myself from my whole past history and career.'<sup>61</sup> Vilatte quotes Mar Dionysius' explanation of which Mar Athanasius was his consecrator, and

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<sup>60</sup> 'Bishop S. G. Messmer Talks About Vilatte', *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 2 March 1899, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> AT Collection, Letters, J. R. Vilatte to Editor, *Milwaukee Sunday Sentinel*, 9 April 1899.

chastises Messmer for not only presuming to judge his episcopal orders, but also for dismissing his suitability for continuing to carry on in ministry.

I could understand Bishop Messmer or anyone else sending their objections and their proofs to the Holy Office direct, but I consider it a scandalous abuse for him to take the matter out of the hands of the proper tribunal, pass sentence on me, viz.; to give me a most severe penance, never to allow me the honor of exercising the office of bishop, even if validly consecrated nor even the functions of the priesthood unless within well defined limits.<sup>62</sup>

Vilatte returned to Paris sometime between mid-February and late March 1900. While there he ordained four priests, instigating what *La Lanterne* described as the ‘Battle of the Bishops.’<sup>63</sup> On 1 April 1900 Cardinal Richard, Archbishop of Paris issued a circular to all the French Roman Catholic clergy stating that Vilatte had ordained two priests without his permission. Richard adds that he verified with the Holy Office that Vilatte had neither the authority, nor the jurisdiction to perform any sacerdotal acts.<sup>64</sup> Vilatte’s response to Richard was defiant: ‘I have made complete submission to Rome. By this act alone I have regained possession of temporalities according to the example of Bishops of the first ages. It has pleased Your Eminence to declare me a dissenter from Rome, but I declare myself to be in unity with Jesus

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<sup>62</sup> AT Collection, Letters, J. R. Vilatte to Editor, *Milwaukee Sunday Sentinel*, 9 April 1899.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Bataille D’Évêques’, *La Lanterne*, 23 April 1900, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> ‘“Archbishop” Vilatte Turns Up In Paris’, *The World*, 14 May 1900, p. 3.

Christ and the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church.’<sup>65</sup> Vilatte also wrote to the Pope on 18 April 1900 and demanded clarity in his status.

Am I or am I not accepted by the Roman Church? May I or may I not count upon the Roman Church for the defense of the sacred character of which I am possessed? Must I or must I not remain in the bosom of the Roman Church, the missionary bishop, who freely makes use of the faculties conferred upon him by the apostles? Your holiness can readily understand that my conscience desires an immediate and categorical answer.<sup>66</sup>

Vilatte insisted that his election and consecration meant that he had that right to fulfil his sacerdotal duties; all that he required was to know if the Roman Catholic Church would accept him.<sup>67</sup> Messmer’s comment to the Green Bay Post-Gazette, however, suggests that while Rome might acknowledge Vilatte’s ecclesial dignity, his expectation to exercise it would probably be denied or strictly curtailed.

On 20 June 1905, in a letter to Mar Dionysius in India, Vilatte was open about his foray to Rome: ‘I very sorrowfully confess that I had returned to the abominable heresy of Rome six years ago. It did not take me more than six months to see the abomination and desolation of that schismatical and heretical Roman Church. I

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<sup>65</sup> At the moment we have only an excerpt of Vilatte’s reply to Richard, which was probably also 18 April 1900: “‘Archbishop’ Vilatte Turns Up In Paris’, *The World*, 14 May 1900, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Decree Of Major Excommunication’, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 18 July 1900, p. 12; ‘News And Notes’, *The Church Eclectic*, June 1900, pp. 278-279.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Vilatte Annoys the Cardinal’ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 April 1900, p. 3.



immediately took my stand before God, rose and worked against the lie of Rome, in favour of our Holy Orthodox Faith.’<sup>68</sup> This suggests that, at least from his perspective, things began to disintegrate between Vilatte and Vatican officials in or around July 1899. The Vatican clearly recognised that his orders were valid, but refused to grant him the licence or jurisdiction to exercise that ministry, something that it held was exclusively in the gift of the Pope. For Vilatte neither the Pope nor the Vatican (the institution) had the authority or the right to prevent him from exercising his sacerdotal ministry.

What can we glean from his exchange with Cardinal Richard, and the Pope in April 1900 that might help us better understand what Vilatte believed he was accomplishing by reconciling with Rome? First we need to be clear that, we have almost no material to work with, and are forced to speculate about the most plausible explanation for Vilatte’s thinking and his published comments, and actions in Paris in April 1900. Based on the material we do have, it seems clear that Vilatte had not changed his theological or ecclesiological positions. The traditional explanation of the events of 1899-1900 is that a prideful Vilatte demanded the recognition of Rome; when the Roman Church refused to concede his importance, Vilatte walked away.<sup>69</sup> However, in 1894 when he negotiated with Messmer and Satolli, Vilatte appears to have been more interested in continuing to serve as a priest and missionary among the French speaking immigrants in Wisconsin than he was in

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<sup>68</sup> AT Collection, Letters, Vilatte to Mar Dionysius V, 20 June 1905.

<sup>69</sup> Marx, ‘Vilatte and Rome’, p. 113.

having any role in the hierarchy. There appears to be no evidence of, for example, Vilatte insisting on or demanding attention be paid to him because of his archiepiscopal dignity. His letter to Pope Leo XIII appears to maintain this point. Vilatte was only interested in being a missionary. How he envisioned the shape of that in the context of the Roman Church, he never explains. Vilatte was not a courtier, he was not a politician, nor was he a diplomat. As a bishop, Vilatte would never have fit within the structures and norms of the turn of the century Roman Catholic Church. Based on his comments to the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* in 1899, it appears that in addition to commenting on Vilatte's canonical offence, Messmer understood this, and it seems Rome did too — Vilatte, no matter how hard he worked as a missionary, would remain an outlier, an anomaly, and potentially dangerous to the order of things.

It seems likely that Vilatte's expressed exasperation is an echo of his experience with the European Old Catholics in 1890. He was badly burned by the ecclesiastical politics that promised support and continuity but ended with Vilatte and his mission being effectively abandoned by the Old Catholics. It is likely that Vilatte saw in the Vatican's inaction similar politicking; as he understood it his orders were not in question and Rome knew it. Vilatte, we can reasonably assume, was not seeking any special treatment or privileges, rather he wanted to carry on his mission of converting people to Catholicism. Rome's apparent unwillingness to publicly recognise his orders, and sanction Vilatte continuing his work in the mission field,

was to him, a telltale sign of Vilatte's belief that the problem lay with Romanism's ecclesiology. Ultimately, as Vilatte appeared to express in his letter to Mar Dionysius, it meant that Rome's authority was illegitimate. Realising that the Vatican would not allow him an active ministry, Vilatte withdrew his submission.

When his retraction of his errors was published in February 1899, it was accompanied with optimism within the Roman Catholic press that Vilatte's episcopal orders would be recognised. The *Western Mail* quoted the British Roman Catholic paper the *Monitor*: 'The decision of the Holy Office as regards the validity of Dr. Vilatte's episcopal orders has not yet been published, but is reported at Rome that they will be found to be valid.'<sup>70</sup> The American Roman Catholic clerical journal, *Ecclesiastical Review*, countered both the rumours about the validity of Alvares' consecration, and also what was believed to be a canonical impediment; Vilatte, a western rite cleric, had been consecrated within the eastern rite, making his orders invalid.<sup>71</sup> The author sets up the key points, strongly suggesting that Vilatte's episcopal orders are valid, without making it a position of the journal (reasonably so, because this was not within their authority). Alvares, the Patriarch, and Vilatte were schismatic, and even heretical, but the article did not give the impression that that

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<sup>70</sup> 'Dr. Vilatte At Rome. The Bishop Retracts. His Errors. His Orders Alleged To Be Valid', *The Western Mail*, 11 February 1899, p. 4. The use of the honorific 'Dr.' in the headline appears to be either a mistaken belief that as a bishop he did have had a higher degree, or an honorific *because* he was a bishop, and is only found on a few occasions in the British press at the time.

<sup>71</sup> 'Recent Schismatical Movements', p. 6-7.

their orders were invalid.<sup>72</sup> Finally, while the French Roman Catholic paper, *La Croix*, made no positive pronouncement regarding his orders, neither did they write that Vilatte's consecration was in doubt. Instead the article in *La Croix*, published days after his recantation was publicised, stated simply that Vilatte had been 'Ordained priest by Herzog, Old Catholic bishop of Berne, and consecrated bishop by Alvares, schismatic Portuguese bishop of Ceylon.'<sup>73</sup> Even though rumours were circulating at the time about the possibility that Alvares was not properly consecrated, it appears that Vilatte's orders were unofficially recognised. Even so, the same reports, especially in the British and American press, made it clear that Vatican officials were approaching Vilatte's case with grave caution. No doubt aware of the details of Vilatte's approach in 1894, Vatican officials were not entirely convinced that he was truly prepared to submit. It seems possible that the tentative nature of the Vatican's recognition of Vilatte's episcopal status was not a matter of ecclesiology, rather of holding back, in order to have something in hand in case things went wrong thereafter, as indeed they did.

*The Sacred Heart Review*, an American Roman Catholic clerical newspaper, which for the past five years had satirised Vilatte, published on 23 December 1899 an official statement from *The Catholic Universe*: "'Archbishop" Vilatte did not present

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<sup>72</sup> 'Recent Schismatical Movements', pp. 6-8.

<sup>73</sup> 'Ordonné prêtre par Herzog, évêque vieux catholique de Berne, et sacré évêque par Alvarès, évêque schismatique portugais de Ceylan': 'Conversion Remarquable', *La Croix*, 7 February 1899, p. 1.

satisfactory proofs of the validity of his orders, and that they were thus not recognized by Rome, and, secondly, that he was not in the mood to make an unqualified submission.’<sup>74</sup> Days later reports circulated that Vilatte would not be received back into the Roman Catholic church. The reasons given were at best vague: he ‘has had a disagreement’<sup>75</sup> with Roman Catholic authorities. Two weeks later, on 6 January 1900, the *Liverpool Catholic Times* reported that Vilatte had been ‘dismissed by the Holy Office without having his alleged Orders recognised, or without being received into the Church.’<sup>76</sup> Whereas reports in 1898 reported cautiously that there was acceptance of his orders, reports in 1900 were unambiguous; Vilatte’s orders were invalid.

He was consecrated bishop by the schismatic churches of Syria, his bull of consecration bearing the date December 29, 1891, the ceremony being performed at Colombo by Mgr. Alvares, old Catholic archbishop of Goa, assisted by Mar Gregorios and Mar Athanasios, two schismatic bishops at Malabar. Subsequently Mr. Vilatte, or Mar Timotheos, revisited Rome, hoping for recognition of his sacerdotal and episcopal orders, which were not

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<sup>74</sup> ‘In The Same Boat With The Anglicans’, *The Sacred Heart Review*, 23 December 1899, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Vilatte Again At Odds With Church Of Rome’, *Chicago Tribune*, 25 December 1899, p. 5; ‘Rejected By Rome, He Is Again A Wanderer’, *The World*, 25 December 1899, p. 3; ‘Refused To Act The Penitent’s Part’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 December 1899, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Vilatte’s Orders Not Valid’ *The Intermountain And Colorado Catholic*, 6 January 1900, p. 8.

admitted as valid.<sup>77</sup>

While the Syrian church that authorised and consecrated Vilatte was recognised as having the historic episcopate, his own individual orders were uniquely set aside as invalid. What is curious is that the initial report states that Vilatte did not provide sufficient proof of his consecration, yet Catholic media had been quoting directly from Vilatte's consecration documents for the past two years. The exchange between Mar Alvares and Fr. Ignatius - again proving beyond doubt that Vilatte was properly consecrated - was known both in the United States and in Britain.<sup>78</sup> It appears, without further evidence, that this was a strategy on the part of Roman Catholic officials to undermine Vilatte's Catholicity, because relations between the two had soured.

Rome excommunicated Vilatte on 13 June 1900. His consecration of Paolo Miraglia the previous month appears to have spurred the decision. The decree focusses on Miraglia, describing his consecration as the culmination of his scandal and heresy. Between his having left Rome in December 1899, and his establishing a residence in Paris shortly thereafter, Vilatte had ordained four priests, and consecrated Miraglia. Why the Vatican took six months to formalise the end to its interaction with Vilatte is intriguing. Prior to 1900, Roman Catholic officials did not

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<sup>77</sup> 'Decree Of Major Excommunication', *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 18 July 1900, p. 12.

<sup>78</sup> Making it necessary to undermine Alvares' validity as well as Vilatte's.

take any formal action against Vilatte. After the declaration of major excommunication, relations between the two sides became increasingly sour.

Vilatte had contact with many people between his departure for Europe in June 1898 and his reported arrival at Ligugé in France in November 1898. If during this period he had been considering submitting to the Roman church we might expect at least one of his social contacts to have leaked it to the press, or to have spoken up in the immediate wake of the announcement in January that Vilatte was in Rome. As yet, no such evidence has been found. The period before his visit to Rome strongly suggests that his commitment to Independent Catholicism - to Catholic reform - was as solid as ever. Were this not the case, and his intent was to submit to Rome when he left the United States in the Summer of 1898, why did he not go directly to Rome instead of meeting other clerics, organising Independent Catholics in Britain and Europe, and only then going to Rome? Though admittedly meagre, the available evidence suggests that Vilatte had been courted and persuaded to submit. It seems that Parisot, and possibly Fr. David Fleming, were authorised and possibly instructed to approach Vilatte. Parisot, based on his biography of Vilatte, appears to have been interested in Catholic reunion. At the time, the Roman Church sought to bring the Eastern Churches within the Ottoman Empire into union with it, resulting in a number of defections of Eastern priests and bishops throughout Vilatte's lifetime. Parisot's existing academic link to the Syrian Church, and Vilatte's own

connection, would have provided a bridge for Parisot to approach Vilatte about reconciliation. Perhaps it was thought that persuading Vilatte to submit would end the Goa Schism of Mar Alvares, as well as providing an example to other Syrian Orthodox who might themselves be persuaded to unite with Rome. Fleming's involvement may have arisen from concerns that, with Vilatte having ordained Fr. Ignatius, a well known ritualist, were Vilatte's brand of Catholicism independent of Rome to take off, it would attract more Anglican ritualists and disaffected secular Roman clergy who complained that the hierarchy, most of whom were members of orders, were prejudiced against them.<sup>79</sup> The total absence of detail from contemporary newspaper reports — in contrast to the announcement of Vilatte's recantation — suggests that the content of the negotiations was not meant to be public. It appears that Vilatte erroneously assumed that he would be able to continue to function as a missionary bishop. Rome, on the other hand, wanted him out of the way. What can be said with some confidence is that Vilatte would not have visited Rome and 'retracted his errors' without some substantive offer first being made to him. It is also clear that, realising his trust had once more been misplaced, as it had been with Utrecht in 1890, Vilatte was angry, and took to countering Roman Catholic positions vigorously after December 1899. Likewise, Rome, having held back the symbolic formality of publishing its recognition of his orders, now moved to attack

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<sup>79</sup> An example, which contributed to Arnold Harris Mathew's consecration by the Old Catholics in 1908, is Fr. Joseph O'Halloran, mentioned in chapter 1: 'The Rebellious Priest', *Liverpool Echo*, 21 July 1897, p. 3.



and dismiss Vilatte as never before.

### **1925: Prévost Approaches Vilatte**

*La Croix* reported on 23 June 1925 that, on the first of the month, Vilatte, then living in Paris, had reconciled with Rome. The report gives every impression that Vilatte's submission was entirely his own idea. Unlike in 1899, where Dom Parisot and Fr. Fleming were prominently mentioned, reports of Vilatte's submission in 1925 offered no such attribution. Only Vilatte's private letters, a letter from a faculty member of St. Laurent, and a biography of the man responsible for making this last attempt at acquiring Vilatte's submission verify that Fr. Eugène Prévost was responsible. Who was he, and what role did he play? Vilatte had returned to France in July 1923; why did he do so, and did that have some connection to his eventual recantation? This final attempt by Rome to get Vilatte's submission was only a partial success, and he continued to fight for the cause of Catholic reform, and demand that he be allowed to function in ordained ministry. The effort was frustrating. Once again, he had lost patience, and was in the process of reasserting his independence when he died on 1 July 1929.

At a synod held in Chicago in April 1920, Vilatte, saying that he was no longer up to the physical demands of his role, stepped aside as leader of the church in favour

of Frederick Ebenezer John Lloyd, whom he had consecrated on 19 December 1915.<sup>80</sup>

Vilatte was 65, and had been an active missionary since the early 1880s. Vilatte returned to France in July 1923. When *La Croix* announced his submission in June 1925, the report stated that 'Archbishop Vilatte returned to France two years ago, where he retired to solitude.'<sup>81</sup> This was not exactly true, but it was certainly what Roman Catholic officials wanted him to do. His passport application, made ten days before his departure from the United States on 30 June 1923, states 'religious work' as the reason for travelling to France.<sup>82</sup> The following year, in a letter to Jean Bricaud, Vilatte wrote: 'I once again need to live for the restoration of the Orthodox faith in France.'<sup>83</sup> This was the same year that the Left Bloc coalition won the French general election of 11 May 1924. The new premier Edouard Harriot was a strong proponent of the 1905 separation law, and moved to enforce it in Alsace-Lorraine, causing protests. Vilatte had friends in the new government, who were glad that he had returned to France, and encouraged him to re-engage with the Independent Catholic mission he had helped Henri des Houx to establish in 1907, following the passage of

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<sup>80</sup> Appolis on Vilatte stepping down and dates Lloyd's consecration to 29 December 1915: Appolis, 'En marge de la Séparation', p. 84. Brandreth gives 28 December: Brandreth, *Episcopi Vagantes*, p. 40. Anson, citing an edition of the *American Catholic Quarterly*, the American church's organ under Lloyd's editorship, dates it to 19 December, and it is for this reason that I've decided Anson is most likely the accurate account: Anson, *Bishops At Large*, p. 125.

<sup>81</sup> 'Une grande conversion', *La Croix*, 23 June 1925, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> Ancestry, *Vilatte Passport Application*, 22 June 1923.

<sup>83</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, p. 3: Vilatte to Bricaud, 20 July 1924.

the 1905 law. Vilatte was a proponent of the separation of church and state, believing that only when the church was independent of the political control of the state could it be authentic. He wrote to an unnamed correspondent on 27 May describing meetings he had with politicians on the previous two days, Sunday, 25 May and Monday, 26 May. The new government, he wrote, planned to apply the 1905 law not to persecute the Roman Church, but to support the rights of the *cultuelles*. He advised the recipient not to take action, but that it 'is necessary to wait, but now we wait with the certainty of success.'<sup>84</sup> Appolis, citing a report in the Swiss German Old Catholic paper *Katholik*, believed that Vilatte returned to France in 1922, well funded, and committed to campaigning for the Left Bloc.<sup>85</sup> Having left the American church in safe hands under Lloyd, Vilatte, possibly at the invitation of adherents and supporters, turned his attention to the Independent Catholic mission he began with des Houx in 1907. Though he had friends in the new government, it is unlikely that Vilatte arrived in France with a campaign chest of money, or that he did so intending to campaign for the Left Bloc himself. There is, for example, no press coverage of his involvement in the campaign. Vilatte was politically active in the United States, and was, for example, one of those responsible for organising the French speaking Republican Club in Red River Wisconsin in late 1893.<sup>86</sup> However, the currently available letters make no mention of his involvement in, or feelings about, the 1924

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<sup>84</sup> Appolis, 'En marge de la Séparation', p. 84.

<sup>85</sup> Appolis, 'En marge de la Séparation', p. 84.

<sup>86</sup> 'Duvall Republicans Rejoice', *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 17 November 1893, p. 3.

election campaign in France. The Left Bloc's victory, and its clear support of Vilatte and his national Catholic vision, however, clearly injected renewed optimism into his original plans.

About a year after his meeting with the French politicians *La Croix* reported that Vilatte recanted on 1 June 1925 in the presence of Archbishop Cerretti, the Papal Nuncio to Paris. Vilatte's recantation, published in *La Croix*, was formulaic, and not a personal declaration explaining his reasons for submitting to the Roman Church. Most of the comment was from *La Croix*.

This is where grace was waiting for him. Reflecting on the sterility of all sects and religions separated from the Roman Catholic Church and being further convinced of the indispensable necessity of the unique and infallible magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, he begged the Vicar of Jesus Christ to receive him in his fold, and he submitted subserviently to his supreme authority. His Holiness Pius XI welcomed him with a great kindness and paternity.<sup>87</sup>

Comparing the texts of the 1899 and 1925 recantations offers little insight, as both

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<sup>87</sup> 'C'est là que la grâce l'attendait. Réfléchissant à la stérilité de toutes les sectes et religions séparées de l'Eglise catholique romaine et étant de plus en plus persuadé de la nécessité indispensable du magistère unique et infallible du Pontife romain, il a supplié le Vicaire de Jésus-Christ de le recevoir dans son bercail et il s'est soumis filialement à son autorité suprême. S. S. Pie XI l'a accueilli avec une grande bonté et paternité': 'Une Grande Conversion', *La Croix*, 23 June 1925, p. 1.

are formulaic. In both, Vilatte is made to say that he apologises to the Roman Church for 'having attacked and misrepresented'<sup>88</sup> her, and that he withdrew any teaching of his that did so; that he confesses that the Roman Church is 'the one true Church of Christ, outside of which there is no salvation.'<sup>89</sup> Where there is a difference is in the clause regarding his ordination and consecration. The 1925 edition reads: 'I regret and repent of having obtained holy orders and of having conferred them on others contrary to the teachings and laws of the Holy Roman Church'.<sup>90</sup> The 1899 version is stronger, and more legalistic: 'Moreover, I sincerely regret that I obtained holy orders in an unlawful and irregular way (according to the teaching of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, which I now fully understand and accept), and that I illicitly and sacrilegiously conferred upon others various orders which belong by right to the Holy Roman Catholic Church.'<sup>91</sup> It is this clause which Vilatte continued to argue about with Roman officials from 1925 until his death in 1929. This was, in Vilatte's mind, an attempt to invalidate his orders and was unacceptable. They had been bestowed and received in good faith, and he in turn passed them on to others in

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<sup>88</sup> 'Recantation Of Joseph René Vilatte', *The Tablet*, 11 February 1899, p. 221; '...et pour avoir attaqué et présenté sous un faux jour la Sainte Eglise Romaine': 'Une Grande Conversion', *La Croix*, 23 June 1925, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> 'Recantation Of Joseph René Vilatte', *The Tablet*, 11 February 1899, p. 221; '...qu'elle est la seule vraie Eglise du Christ, en dehors de laquelle il n'y a pas de salut': 'Une Grande Conversion', *La Croix*, 23 June 1925, p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> '...je regrette et je me repens d'avoir obtenu les saints ordres et de les avoir conférés à d'autres contrairement aux enseignements et aux lois de la Sainte Eglise Romaine...': 'Une Grande Conversion', *La Croix*, 23 June 1925, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> 'Recantation Of Joseph René Vilatte', *The Tablet*, 11 February 1899, p. 221.

good faith. It was unjust, he argued, for the Roman Church to attempt to treat the matter otherwise. Finally, in both texts, Vilatte is made to say that he made ‘this declaration... freely and spontaneously’<sup>92</sup> in order to repair that damage and scandal to the church that he and his actions caused. This, however, was not quite true. In a letter to Abbot Janssens in November, 1927, Vilatte admits that Ceretti insisted on the addition of that clause to his 1925 recantation.<sup>93</sup> What is more, we now know that Vilatte did not beg to be received back into the Roman Church, as *La Croix* reported, nor was his recantation entirely spontaneous. Rather, one individual, Fr. Eugène Prévost, was instrumental in acquiring Vilatte’s submission.

Fr. Eugène Prévost was a Canadian priest who founded the Fraternité Sacerdotale, officially recognised by Pope Leo XIII in 1901, an order dedicated to the care of priests. Aside from the fact that he might have known Vilatte, or people in his circle, what is the evidence that he was responsible for managing Vilatte’s reconciliation, and what inspired him to undertake to do so? In contrast to the attempt in 1899, where both Parisot and Fr. David Fleming were mentioned in connection with Vilatte’s submission, Prévost is not mentioned in the published reports. Aside from his biographer’s account, how do we know Eugène Prévost was

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<sup>92</sup> ‘Recantation Of Joseph René Vilatte’, *The Tablet*, 11 February 1899, p. 221; ‘Je fais cette déclaration librement et spontanément...’: ‘Une Grande Conversion’, *La Croix*, 23 June 1925, p. 1.

<sup>93</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, p. 9: Vilatte to François Janssens, 19 November 1927.

directly responsible? Two documents, a letter that Vilatte wrote to Bricaud in November 1927,<sup>94</sup> and a report from Fr. Elias Vanier, a faculty member of St. Laurent seminary, to Marx about Vilatte's time there, confirm that Prévost was instrumental in acquiring Vilatte's submission.<sup>95</sup> How did he become involved, and why? Appolis suggests that the rise in anti-clericalism linked to the electoral victory of the Left Bloc alarmed Roman officials.<sup>96</sup> Prévost, resident in Paris at the time, saw an opportunity, and at a meeting in Rome with Pope Pius XI and Cardinal Gasparri, Prévost sought their official sanction to try to acquire Vilatte's submission.<sup>97</sup> Prévost's account suggests that the Left Bloc was in the process of creating a French National Church independent of Rome, and, though Harriot sought to make Vilatte its head, Vilatte himself had his reservations.<sup>98</sup> Prévost learned of both the meeting between Vilatte and the delegation of Deputies in May, and Vilatte's reservations through an inside informant, Vilatte's secretary Fr. Maes. Prévost was his confessor. During an audience with the Pope and Gasparri on 24 October, Prévost informed them of his proposal regarding Vilatte and received their permission to work with Cerretti and

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<sup>94</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, pp. 9-10: Vilatte to Jean Bricaud, 22 November 1927.

<sup>95</sup> AT Collection, 'Report on Vilatte made by Rev. Elias Vanier, C.S.C. Of the faculty of the College of St. Laurent, Canada', 1937.

<sup>96</sup> Appolis, 'En marge de la Séparation', p. 85.

<sup>97</sup> Appolis, 'En marge de la Séparation', p. 85.

<sup>98</sup> Hamelin, *Le père Eugène Prévost*, p. 331.

obtain Vilatte's abjuration.<sup>99</sup> Prévost first approached Vilatte on 19 January 1925.<sup>100</sup> We know, from his letter to the unnamed correspondent, that though Vilatte urged caution, he was still optimistic that a renewal of the mission he planted in France in 1907 had a chance of success. Thus, while he was not about to rush into the politicians' plan, he was not, it seems determined to reject the idea. We are left with many unanswered questions. Why, if Prévost thought it was so important to stop the establishment (or revival) of a national Independent Catholic Church, did he wait five months before presenting his proposal to the Pope? As with the attempt in 1899, we have no indication of the content of his conversations or negotiations with Vilatte, or indeed by what means Prévost persuaded him to submit. All we know for certain is that Prévost, with Vatican approval, undertook the task of converting and later managing Vilatte after the 1924 election until his death in 1929.

Vilatte's submission in June 1925 should not be interpreted as confirmation that negotiations had concluded. Though the material is sparse — a few letters to Bricaud — they show that Prévost and Dom François Janssens continued to mediate between Vilatte and the Vatican over a number of issues, foremost among them being whether or not he had licence from the Vatican to practice his episcopal office. Vilatte

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<sup>99</sup> Hamelin, *Le père Eugène Prévost*, p. 332. Vilatte mentioned Maes in a letter to Bricaud dated 28 March 1928, and suggests that he did serve as Vilatte's secretary: AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, pp. 10-11: Vilatte to Jean Bricaud, 28 March 1928.

<sup>100</sup> Hamelin, *Le père Eugène Prévost*, p. 331.



was adamant that this was a matter of justice, not only for him, but for his priests, some of whom were now also attempting to reconcile with Rome. Vilatte had no doubt about the validity of his orders, and he knew that neither (in private) did the Roman hierarchy, a fact that he pointed out to Janssens in the same letter. He also refused to allow his four decades of ordained service to be erased or declared defective for the sake of the convenience of the Vatican. Janssens must have proposed that the solution was for Vilatte to submit to being re-ordained, an idea he flatly rejected.

You make note that my holy orders were not given by men of the Church?

Very well, but before submitting myself to re-ordination, I want to know logically and theologically where the flaws are in the succession of my ordination as a priest and consecration as a bishop. Since according to the observation made by His Eminence the Cardinal Meri [*sic*] del Val, all Orthodox priests and bishops such as the Russians, the Armenians, the Syrians, the Romanians, the Serbians, the Bulgarians, the Jansenists and the Old Catholics of all nations would not have to be ordained or consecrated.<sup>101</sup>

Instead, Vilatte demanded nothing less than a formal licence to continue to work in ministry. In an undated letter<sup>102</sup> to Bricaud, Vilatte included the following portion

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<sup>101</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, p. 9: Vilatte to François Janssens, 19 November 1927.

<sup>102</sup> Written sometime before the end of October 1927.

of a letter he had recently written to an unnamed Cardinal: 'I am happy to make known to you that I have every divine right to do so and that neither the Pope nor the Roman Curia have anything to do with it. I simply asked the Holy Father to authorise saying Mass in properties rented by the Republic or owned by the Roman Catholic Church.'<sup>103</sup> This was not merely an issue about his own ecclesiastical rights, it was Vilatte defending those men he had ordained throughout his career. In a letter to Janssens dated 19 November 1927, Vilatte complained that when he recanted, the Nuncio, Cardinal Ceretti made him include an invitation for his followers to do the same, but that those of his priests who had tried to reconcile were being treated as an inconvenience. 'However, the sincere return of several stray sheep from different nations should be a joy, a consolation and not a topic of annoyance or an impassable obstacle to taking their place under the crook of the Good Shepherd. This is my most sincere conviction.'<sup>104</sup>

Vilatte and Bricaud began collaborating on a booklet *Notice sur le Sacerdoce et l'Épiscopat de Mgr Vilatte* in July 1924, a year before his submission to Rome. In August 1927, two months before it was finally published, Vilatte expressed his belief in its importance to Bricaud. 'My goal in printing these pages is to defend myself, and others, against the malice of those that want to negate these sacred acts or to

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<sup>103</sup> This echoes his position in his letter to Leo XIII of 18 April 1900, discussed above: AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, p. 15-16: Vilatte to Jean Bricaud, n.d.

<sup>104</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, p. 9: Vilatte to François Janssens, 19 November 1927.

blaspheme me in the eyes of the Holy Spirit.’<sup>105</sup> It remains to be discovered if the nature of their collaboration shifted after 1925 from an historical account of the emergence of Independent Catholicism, for the purpose of future developments in France, to an apologetic, proving that there was nothing defective about Vilatte’s orders. Mentions of the project in early letters only hint that this might have been the case. To protect himself and his friends in the Vatican, Vilatte arranged for Bricaud to publish the booklet in Lyon. Soon after its distribution, in late October 1927, Vilatte wrote to Bricaud that it was having the desired effect. The professor of dogma from the seminary in Versailles visited Vilatte on a few occasions, and on one of the most recent he informed Vilatte that ‘the professor of history of the Seminary... found this booklet very lucid and convincing from both a dogmatic and historical viewpoint. The booklet is already very widespread. It is bearing its fruit, thanks to you.’<sup>106</sup>

Vilatte was generally upbeat in his letters to Bricaud, and polite and positive about his life on the monastery grounds. We don’t know how much pressure Vatican officials placed on him to further renounce his sacerdotal history, or take other actions convenient to Rome, but in a rare break with his usual demeanour he admitted to Bricaud in November 1927 that the stress was taking its toll. ‘I am so nervous from the two years and ten months spent in Versailles, and so many other

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<sup>105</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, pp. 5-6: Vilatte to Jean Bricaud, 16 August 1927.

<sup>106</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, pp. 8-9: Vilatte to Jean Bricaud, 14 November 1927.

emotions, that I tremble and shake continually.’<sup>107</sup> Vilatte was clearly coming to the end of his patience, and preparing to make a decision. In a letter to Bricaud dated 29 December 1928, offering his good wishes for the coming year, Vilatte wrote: ‘There are so many things to discuss that I dare not put on paper...I wait the thawing of the snows, you understand?...[I have] said nothing to anyone, but I am actively in search of a property. The liberty, justice and fraternity of God’s children are far from Babylon.’<sup>108</sup> Vilatte died on 1 July 1929. A. Jouanny, a friend of Vilatte’s and sympathiser of Independent Catholicism knew of Vilatte’s intention to once again sever his tie with Rome. Jouanny believed that Vilatte was about to realise his plan when he died as he later wrote to Bricaud on 12 January 1930: ‘He was on the verge of reclaiming his liberty.’<sup>109</sup>

Throughout his ‘exile’, as Jouanny described it, Vilatte actively wrote to other independent Catholics, engaged with the French independents, and campaigned at Rome to defend his rights as an orthodox bishop (and thus, the rights of those he had ordained who also wished to reconcile with Rome). We only know about these activities because of the incomplete collection of letters Vilatte exchanged with Bricaud. Unfortunately, neither these nor other currently available sources offer a

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<sup>107</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, pp. 9-10: Vilatte to Jean Bricaud, 22 November 1927.

<sup>108</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, pp. 11-12: Vilatte to Jean Bricaud, 29 December 1928.

<sup>109</sup> AT Collection, Garver, *Monsignor Joseph René Vilatte*, p. 15: A. Jouanny to Jean Bricaud, 12 January 1930.

glimpse into Vilatte's thinking about why he accepted Prévost's proposition in 1925 nor what promises Prévost was authorised to make to Vilatte in order to acquire his abjuration. As was the case in 1899, when Mar Alvares and Fr. Ignatius expressed their dismay at Vilatte's recantation, in 1925 Giraud, who had welcomed Vilatte's return to France the previous year was furious. It appears that the Vatican's long equivocation over granting Vilatte authorisation to practice, was not only a tactic to keep him silenced and out of the way, but that it was, in part, the cause of Vilatte's frustration, not just in 1927-29, but also in 1899-1900. He knew the canons and tradition, he knew that there was nothing defective with his orders, and he was not going to pretend otherwise for the convenience of Roman Catholic authority. It is interesting that in his language as well as in his living arrangements, Vilatte kept a distance between himself and the Roman Catholic Church. It was as though he understood that the process, the conversion, was not complete, and indeed it was not.

### **Conclusion: Vilatte's Relationship With Rome Still A Mystery**

We may never know the full story of Vilatte's two submissions to the Roman Catholic Church. As yet, the evidence is still sparse. Whereas the traditional narrative has Vilatte begging to return (based in part on the published recantations, and in part on the attitude of those writing the accounts, namely Anson and Marx) it

seems clear that this was not the case, and that in fact Vilatte was courted by Roman Catholic clergy who had received official sanction to acquire his submission. The traditional narrative also argues that Vilatte's reason for submitting, especially in 1899, was that he sought the recognition of Roman Catholic authorities, money, and a position. His activity before, during and after all three occasions, as we have seen, raises serious questions about the veracity of the traditional accounts. No doubt Vilatte was discouraged by the difficulties of converting disaffected Roman Catholics to Independent Catholicism. But he was a missionary, used to the struggle of bringing people together, of convincing them, and the set-backs that often came with that. Was that discouragement enough to make him abandon his belief in Catholicism without Romanism? We are still left asking why he did it, and what were his thoughts and feelings on the matter. But we must also be careful not to paint an image of Vilatte as being passively led towards submission. He was not a victim, nor was he weak, rather the arguments presented and the promises made must have been enough to persuade him to undergo the process of abjuration. Did Vilatte's submission to Rome mean that he abandoned his commitment to Catholic reform and Independent Catholicism? The material currently available, including contemporary reports surrounding all three occasions, cast no light on his reasoning, nor do they suggest that Vilatte was dissatisfied with the theological programme of Independent Catholicism. The text of his recantation is so formulaic that it is difficult to glean anything other than that this was the form, and that his personal thoughts

on it were unimportant. His published statements after December 1899 and throughout 1900 again make no reference to his having a crisis of conscience or conviction regarding his Independent Catholicism. In short it appears that he did not abandon his commitment to orthodox Catholicism or Catholic reform. Indeed, if the newspaper reports and Anson's record of correspondence between Satolli and Messmer are accurate, Roman Catholic officials themselves did not believe that Vilatte did, or would, abandon his Independent Catholicism.<sup>110</sup> Rather, they hoped that his submission would prevent others from following in his footsteps. We are left to ask, however, what did Vilatte himself hope to achieve?

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<sup>110</sup> Anson, *Bishops At Large*, pp. 111-112.



Vilatte, believed to have been taken after he returned to Paris in 1923



## Conclusion: Vilatte - Reformer and Missionary

Two accounts of Vilatte's career and life, those of Brandreth and Anson, have been the canonical texts for fifty years. Even within the Independent Catholic community, attempts to tell Vilatte's story, such as Thériault's, whose work is most widely known, are weak responses to Brandreth and Anson rather than fresh examinations using new material. Because of this, Vilatte's story has been reduced to his having provided the Independent Catholic movement with apostolic orders, and the substance of what he campaigned for has been lost. This is, in effect, a testament to the success of the canonical accounts, which planted the idea that they were comprehensive, and there was nothing more to be said about the schismatic Vilatte and his ever-shrinking band of delusional followers. This project set out to rediscover Vilatte, using new material, and to approach his career from an academic, rather than a polemical, point of reference. In so doing, I have sought to address the lack of substantive scholarship on the emergence of Independent Catholicism using one of its central figures as a point of reference.

Brandreth, Anson and Marx set out to catalogue, comment upon and judge Vilatte's career from the perspectives of their own religious outlooks. One of the key claims made by the traditional accounts is that, because Vilatte was theologically ignorant, he had no programme for his supposed Catholic reform other than to oppose proper ecclesiastical authority. This in turn allowed them to claim both that his consecration was unjustified and, cultivating an idea not borne out by the evidence, that Vilatte fraudulently (if at all) acquired apostolic orders from the Syrian Orthodox. From the Roman Catholic point of view, Vilatte the Roman Catholic dissident illicitly acquired orders from heretical schismatics in a vain attempt to be reintegrated into the Roman Catholic hierarchy. From the Anglican perspective, the sagacious Frenchman with his gallic good looks and refined manners hoodwinked the troublesome, ignorant natives in India, Ceylon and Syria to acquire for himself a title and power, with key figures such as Patriarch Ignatius Boutros IV and Mar Alvares painted as either complicit in, or naively ignorant, of Vilatte's alleged schemes for self-aggrandisement. Both camps represented Vilatte as a rebel and a dissenter, isolated from serious churchmen and pursuing his grand schemes in that isolation. The evidence, however, shows that Vilatte was supported by, and interacted with bishops, politicians and social reformers. How they influenced him, and he them is yet to be fully explored.

The traditional accounts of Vilatte's career present a caricature of a religious

adventurer; however, he was in every respect save one, a typical turn of the century missionary, experiencing many of the same challenges and successes as missionaries of other denominations. What makes Vilatte's story unique is that he started from nothing but an idea of progressive Catholicism, and with the zeal of a missionary. Other missionaries had mission boards directing and funding their efforts, but Vilatte was the only Independent Catholic missionary and bishop in the United States, indeed in the Americas. Vilatte was indefatigable and ever the optimist (at least in public), at times naive and at others over-ambitious, but the evidence shows that he was honest, pragmatic, and not afraid to confront others who he believed were misrepresenting him or themselves. He was, however, realistic, and in no way a romantic, unlike Lee, Fr. Ignatius, and even Grafton. The traditional accounts' success in convincing readers that there was no substance to Vilatte's project, and that these accounts successfully covered all that there was to say about him and his legacy, is itself interesting, and suggests further research into the history of turn of the century ecclesiastical politics and the public relations campaigns that accompanied them. Nevertheless, these traditional accounts find little support in the evidence we have about Vilatte's career, and in many ways that evidence presents a much more complex and interesting history.

In nineteenth century America one's Catholic identity was tied to one's national Catholicism, and not necessarily to the 'universal' Catholicism of Rome, and its

loyalty to the Pope. American Roman Catholic bishops struggled to combat this and to forge a pure Roman Catholicism. Many immigrants saw this as an attempt to take away their rights as new Americans, and forcibly to enculturate them. Vilatte rejected the imposition of this structural redesign. National Catholicisms, he argued, were natural, and representative of the earliest churches. The Papacy, like all Patriarchates, was a convenience for the good order of the church, and not a divinely instituted office. Thus, loyalty and obedience to the Bishop of Rome was not an essential element of true Catholic identity. Only faith in Christ and adherence to the doctrine of the ecumenical councils - which defined the church's relationship with Christ - set the true standard of Catholic identity.

Vilatte believed that a non-centralised network of Catholic churches could not only check heretical ideas, but also be engaged and unified enough to recognise and test modern discoveries of doctrine, ready for a future ecumenical council. The Roman model, on the other hand, provided no check against the power of one individual, or one small group, to promulgate untested and unsubstantiated doctrines not shared by the universal church. Vilatte's model allowed for the greatest possible freedom among and within churches to explore and experiment. While this was its greatest strength, it was also its greatest weakness. The effect of this can be observed within the French church under Houssaye and Giraud's leadership, and it has impacted Independent Catholicism ever since Vilatte's death in 1929.<sup>1</sup> Without a

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<sup>1</sup> Appolis, 'Une Petite Secte D'Aujourd'hui', pp. 573-589.

strong centre, without a close bond between churches other than their loyalty to him, or to the idea of him (even as his original teachings and example became lost over time), heterodox ideas took hold and the quality control of clergy diminished. The full impact of this has not yet been explored.

Vilatte witnessed the impact of independentism among Roman Catholics. The laity attempted to assert their ownership of the church, arguing that as they funded and built it, they rightfully had a say in its affairs. The American Roman Catholic bishops, on the other hand, demanded ownership of church property and forbade the laity from having any involvement in the workings of the church, arguing that they had neither the divine authority nor competence to interfere in ecclesial matters. For those independentist Roman Catholic parishes that sought out Vilatte he insisted that they commit to Catholic reform, or return and make peace with their Roman bishop. Vilatte's focus was on the local community, empowering its membership to take action, and to own their Catholic faith; something he both witnessed and participated in as a missionary in the United States. This would, he believed, stem the loss of believers to irreligion or heretical sects such as Spiritism and Protestantism.

Perhaps one of the key errors of the earlier accounts was to view Vilatte not in his own right as an Orthodox prelate and convert, but as a dissident who only sought acceptance within the Roman or Anglican churches. A dissident would have stated his demands, and held out, or negotiated to realise relief from X, or in favour of Y.

Vilatte opposed what he called Romanism and the confusion of Anglo-Catholicism, but he did so as an outsider, not as an insider seeking resolution of his demands. What is more, he believed that as the Orthodox and the Old Catholic Churches pursued Catholic reform and unity (but not conformity), the Roman Catholics and the Protestants would eventually see where true orthodoxy lies, and reunite with the true universal church. Vilatte never expected to live to see this realised, but he did believe it was the most orthodox and the most practical way to work towards Christian reunion.

The evidence shows, once again, that contrary to the traditional narrative, Vilatte had a platform, a programme, and a rationale, and he was not merely a Roman Catholic dissident unhappy with that church's expression of Catholicism, but saw structural and doctrinal failings within it that endangered orthodoxy and Catholic identity.

Vilatte, Grafton, Coxe, the American Roman Catholic bishops and others all participated in a public contest about the nature of Catholic identity on the turn-of-the-century American mission field. Whichever side won the argument could potentially re-shape the idea of Catholicism not just in the United States, but in Europe as well. Though only touched upon in this project, this was a unique historical setting, one in which Vilatte played an important role, making the other two camps nervous (thus their respective campaigns against him), and it is worthy

of future investigation. More work can be done on the interplay between Vilatte and his work, and the emergence of, for example, the Polish National Catholic Church under the leadership of Franciszek Hodur. This project has shown that Vilatte's story, and his founding role in the emergence of Independent Catholicism, is more substantive and more interesting than we have been previously led to believe. This is merely a scaffold, or corrected baseline upon which future research might be pursued.

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<sup>1</sup> Consists of material collected over more than twenty years from libraries, and the personal collections of Independent Catholics. Some are originals; the bulk of the collection, however, is photographic copies or scans of originals.



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